California pediatric hospitalizations surge as Newsom boasts about handling of pandemic

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Daily confirmed pediatric COVID-19 hospitalizations in California reached an average of 102 for the week ending September 2. This is 770 percent above the level in early June 2021 before schools reopened and only 29 percent below their previous high of 144 in January 2021. This rapid increase in incidence of severe COVID-19 is a devastating indictment of the Democratic Party and its pandemic strategy of allowing the virus to circulate widely in reopened schools, businesses and sporting events with token mitigation measures in place.

As the September 14 deadline approaches for the gubernatorial recall election, the surge in child hospitalizations also exposes the central lie upon which Newsom's entire campaign is based: that his administration's policies have protected Californians, particularly children, from the pandemic.

The national Democratic Party is deeply concerned that Newsom may lose the election, with the party and wealthy Silicon Valley and Hollywood donors flooding over $60 million into his campaign, against roughly $8 million raised by the far-right backers of the recall.

No serious attempt is being made to present the recall as an endorsement of Newsom's record. Instead, they are relying on workers' justifiable fear that a "yes" victory would usher in the ultra-right Republican talk show host Larry Elder, who, in addition to scrapping the minimum wage and attacking reproductive rights, explicitly aims to remove all remaining efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 in favor of a homicidal "herd immunity" policy.

Former President Obama recently released an ad stating that the election is a choice "between protecting our kids and putting them at risk." One of Newsom's major video ads begins with the claim that "with Delta surging, Gavin Newsom is protecting California."

To justify this assessment, Democrats point to a full vaccination rate of 66 percent for those 12 and older, according to the *New York Times*. Daily new cases of COVID-19 in California, reported by Worldometers.info, for which the 7-day average was 10,176 on September 8, was a 77 percent reduction from the high of 45,021 in December 22 of last year. Texas, which has banned masks in schools and has a lower 12 and older vaccination rate of only 58 percent, has 18,532 daily average new cases, approaching the all-time high of 22,968 in January 2021.

However, these case numbers mask the reality of a poorly developed testing and reporting infrastructure. California's reported 7-day average case rates were 37 percent higher the day before Labor Day weekend, with the *New York Times* noting a dip in reported numbers across the country over the long weekend. Hospitalizations provide a more accurate picture of the true state of the pandemic and the realities workers face under a Democratic-led mitigation policy.

Data from the "COVID-19 Reported Patient Impact and Hospital Capacity by Facility" dataset, compiled by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, illustrates trends in pediatric and adult COVID-19 hospitalizations. Data presented in this article demonstrates the choice workers face between the twin ruling class policies of herd immunity (promoted by Republicans in states such as Florida, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas) and mitigation (advanced by Democrats in states such as California and New York, as well as the Biden administration).

Pediatric COVID-19 hospitalizations in California remained below 35 per day from May 1 through mid-July of 2021, as schools were largely closed and the Alpha variant remained dominant in the state, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. Schools began to fully reopen in August at the orders of the Newsom administration, following the lead of the Biden administration, with the full support of American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and the teachers unions.

Students were herded into full classrooms, making physical distancing impossible. Remote learning options were offered only at the last minute, with many districts refusing to allow students to opt into remote learning or placing steep barriers to entry. Testing was left up to cash-strapped districts. The definition of "exposure" and requirements for quarantine were changed on an entirely unscientific basis to allow the continuation of in-person instruction amid widespread community transmission. Wildfire smoke forced educators in much of the state to choose whether to open doors and windows for ventilation while inhaling dangerously polluted air or keeping them closed and worsening the risk of transmission. Everyone was asked to wear masks indoors.

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The result is illustrated in the rapid rise in pediatric COVID-19 hospitalizations beginning in August, which has strained pediatric emergency care capacity in parts of the state. In the week ending August 26, reported hospitalizations reached 112 children per day, falling slightly the next week. This is likely due in part to the increased effects of the Delta variant on children. However, it also suggests massive undercounting of pediatric cases of COVID-19.

The case of New York, which has not yet opened most schools for in-person learning, illustrates the obvious role of schools in transmitting the virus. Pediatric hospitalizations in that state are just above 31 per day, less than half the level in California on a per capita basis.

With the exception of mask mandates and other tepid mitigation measures, the same basic reopening policy was pursued in states such as Florida, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas. The results in Florida, South Carolina and Texas have been record-shattering levels of pediatric hospitalizations.

Levels in Texas are now at 227 per day, roughly double the per capita rate in California. Florida spiked at 104 per day in the week ending August 12, a per capita rate commensurate with the current levels in Texas, before changing its COVID-19 reporting protocols to reduce reported numbers.

South Carolina largely avoided a pediatric surge last winter but has now risen above 25 pediatric hospitalizations, a similar per capita level to Florida and Texas. Oklahoma has a population smaller than South Carolina but has reached 50 pediatric hospitalizations per day, making its per capita level twice that of Texas and roughly four times that of California.

Adult hospitalization levels in California, Oklahoma, Florida and New York mirror pediatric trends. South Carolina and Texas are seeing levels of adult hospitalizations similar to, but not exceeding, previous peaks.

Note that all numbers presented in this article report only confirmed and not suspected COVID-19 cases, meaning that these are conservative estimates.

This presents the "choice" workers face between the Democrats and mitigation vs. the the Republicans and herd immunity.

The latest reported California pediatric hospitalization rate of 102 children per day equates to 3,060 children per month, or one in every 2,900 children, aged 17 and under in the state. If this level were to hold for a full nine-month school year, one in every 320 children would be hospitalized, meaning that most children in the state would likely know a child who was hospitalized this school year.

At 7,070 adult hospitalizations per day, this amounts to 2.3 adult hospitalizations per 100 children in the state every month. By the end of nine months of school, most children would likely see a family member or close adult friend hospitalized with COVID-19. This all assumes that hospitalization rates hold at present levels and do not continue on their current upward trajectory.

These numbers illustrate the devastating cost the Democrats are asking workers to bear as they "learn to live with the virus." The fact that these numbers could double under a Republican-led herd immunity policy does not change the fact that the Newsom administration and the rest of the Democrats, not to mention the teachers unions, have utterly failed to keep workers, and especially children, safe from this deadly pandemic.

The choice between herd immunity and mitigation is just as false as the choice between the Republican and Democratic parties. Eradication of COVID-19 can be accomplished, but only with a socialist strategy. As illustrated by Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz of University of Calgary at a panel discussion hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, a scientifically guided lockdown of about two months could bring transmission down to levels that could be isolated and contained through mass testing, contact tracing, as well as masking and vaccination.

The Democrats and Republicans refuse to even acknowledge the possibility of eradication even though countries such as New Zealand, China and others have been generally successful in pursuing an elimination strategy, even with the Delta variant, a policy that could lead to eradication if adopted globally. The reason for this is simple: In their "cost-benefit analysis," they value the profits of ultra-wealthy capitalists like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos far more than the lives of the highly exploited workers risking their lives under sweatshop conditions in their factories and warehouses.

There is only one candidate on the ballot in California fighting for the elimination of COVID-19, and it is not a coincidence that he is a socialist. We urge all California voters who agree with the arguments put forth here to vote for Socialist Equality Party candidate and educator David Moore and against the right-wing recall. More importantly, we encourage you to contact the Socialist Equality Party today and get involved in the fight for socialism.

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