

Faculty at more than a dozen Georgia colleges protest over absence of mask and COVID-19 vaccine mandates

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College faculty at over a dozen campuses in Georgia started a week-long, daily protest yesterday to demonstrate opposition against the University System of Georgia's (USG) COVID-19 policies, which are forcing professors, adjuncts and graduate students to lecture in-person and to teach in schools that have no masks or vaccine mandates.

The protest in Georgia is an expression of burgeoning anger nationwide over the return to in-person instruction as the Delta variant of the virus is fueling a rise in deaths and hospitalizations.

The protests this week in Georgia follow a string of demonstrations that have sprung up in recent days among educators against the back-to-school campaign being promoted in K-12 and higher education, leading to scores of youth dying or becoming severely ill.

Faculty at the University of Tennessee protested in Knoxville last week for adequate safety measures, while University of South Carolina faculty launched a social media campaign on September 7 highlighting the risks posed to their unvaccinated children and the explosive growth of hospitalizations. At Georgia's Columbus State, a demonstration was held last week by faculty and students who held up signs reading "Mask it or casket" and "Don't make CSU = COVID Spreader University."

Leading up to this week's campus demonstrations, a professor at Georgia College in Milledgeville resigned last week to protest USG's failure to mandate masks for students in classrooms. The instructor, Meredith Styer, made the decision to leave after one of her students refused to wear a mask during a class session, despite Styer's admission that she had a family member with serious health problems who could not get vaccinated. Styer resigned once college officials refused to take any action to safeguard her health. The University later cited state and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines exempting students from mask requirements while in class.

In an interview with 13WMAZ news, Styer conveyed the dangerous and antiscientific nature of the pandemic policies being pursued in colleges and backed by the right-wing

Republican Governor Brian Kemp as well as Joe Biden's White House, along with federal health agencies such as the CDC. "This is about a policy that absolutely puts students at risk in opposition to the agreed upon consensus of public health and epidemiology experts," Styer noted.

In a statement replying to the concerns of Styer, Georgia College said they were strongly encouraging all students and faculty to become vaccinated and wear face coverings but remained opposed to requiring both health measures on campus. The University justified this deadly policy by pointing to CDC guidelines issued this past summer on college reopenings.

The CDC has given a green light for administrators to forgo mask requirements if all students, faculty and staff "are fully vaccinated prior to the start of the semester," something most colleges are not tracking, let alone requiring, for entry onto campuses.

Styer's experience is representative of faculty opposition statewide, with faculty at over 16 college departments spanning 19 campuses demanding this week for university administrators institute the limited mitigation measures—mask and vaccine mandates—to protect the wellbeing of educators and students. Even if such measures were strictly implemented, any serious effort to stop the spread of COVID-19 and development of new variants requires the halt to in-person education combined with an internationally coordinated initiative to stamp out the virus.

At the University of Georgia in Athens (UGA), one professor and participant in the demonstrations said he was defying the state and university's policies by requiring masks for all students who come to his class in-person. UGA math teacher Joseph Fu told *USA Today* that he was at risk of being fired since he was flouting the University's rule that faculty not require their students to wear face coverings.

Fu pointed to widespread fears among colleagues who share similar safety concerns but who seemed intimidated by the prospect of terminations resulting from taking action against administrators. The professor said his colleagues "think I'm a little bit crazy. But a lot of them are also afraid" about being on a campus where there are no masks or vaccine mandates. "I see

the fear in them every day.”

Colleges across the state are still resuming in-person teaching despite infections spiking upward as a direct result of students congregating on campuses with little to no safety precautions in place. Georgia Tech reported 343 new cases since the start of the school year on August 23. Georgia State University reported that 7.7 percent of more than 32,000 of its students have tested positive for the coronavirus thus far. The University of Georgia saw cases jump to more than 500 in one week, with UGA reporting 505 cases the week of August 6, up from 474 the week before.

Contrary to claims that reopening college campuses can be done without contributing to wider transmission in communities, the recent outbreaks in Georgia’s schools have contributed tremendously to the growth of new cases in the state. Numbers from the Georgia Department of Health showed caseloads among those ages 18 to 29 as the group most infected with the disease, totaling more than 250,000 out of 1.45 million of the state’s total cases.

Despite the determination of Georgia faculty to teach under safe conditions, many have expressed frustration at the minimal character of the demonstrations, which are not being conducted as a work stoppage. Under Georgia’s repressive and reactionary labor laws, strikes among public employees are illegal and participants would risk losing their jobs.

Organizations tied to the demonstrations, such as the Georgia Conference of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), have sought to issue assurances to administrators and local officials that the protests would not undermine campus operations. Matthew Boedy, president of the Georgia AAUP, said, “this is not a strike, work stoppage or ‘teach-out,” and that “classes will continue at their appointed time, and education will not cease.”

Significantly, this week’s protesters have not been organized by the main major trade union for Georgia’s college faculty, the United Campus Workers of Georgia (UCWG). The UCWG staged a one-day “die-in” protest at Georgia State University last Thursday, which has been the only action the union has taken amid the newest surge of the virus. In fact, the homepage of UCWG Local 3265 does not even mention the protests that are occurring this week nor are any labor actions being planned. Among the website’s most recent statements is an open letter issued by a UCWG chapter at Georgia Southwestern University which “urged” the USG to implement a mask mandate, i.e., asking the board to put in place policies that will surely be refused.

The UCWG’s feckless response is mirrored in the stance being taken by every teachers union, with all moving in lockstep with the Biden administration’s demand that young people be herded into schools and onto campuses. For primary and secondary education in particular, children are to be placed in unsafe classrooms so that parents can return to work so profits can be maintained for corporations and big business.

While the actions of faculty and staff are an expression of immense determination to fight for scientific and necessary health measures, USG officials have shrugged off the dire warnings being made and remain steadfast in their reckless reopening strategy. USG’s Acting Chancellor Teresa MacCartney defended the university system’s stand against mask mandates on Thursday during a meeting of the Board of Regents. MacCartney pointed to inadequate steps the universities were taking against the pandemic, including distributing masks, gloves, hand sanitizer and COVID-19 tests as reasons to continue in-person instruction.

Following the line dictated by Governor Kemp, who has opposed mask mandates at schools and workplaces, MacCartney declared, “The health and safety protocols are in place.” This is in stark contrast to the health and safety protocols being advocated for by epidemiologists and health experts who say nothing short of shutting down schools and nonessential production, combined with rigorous mitigation efforts like masking, social distancing, and contact tracing are indispensable to eradicate the virus.

Like other governors across the country, Kemp has opposed issuing a state mandate for mask wearing in schools this fall and has given the green light for local districts to pursue their own masking and quarantine policies. The results have been disastrous, as the state’s Department of Public Health indicated in the first week of September that more than half of Georgia’s outbreaks were concentrated in K-12 schools. More than two dozen Georgia teachers and staff members have died of COVID-19 since the start of the school year in July.

Following the Biden administration’s lead, Georgia’s Democrats have waged no serious struggle to oppose the homicidal policies of the Republican governor while feigning outrage over the catastrophic state of the pandemic within schools and the state more broadly. In a press conference earlier this month, Democratic State Representative Roger Bruce made banal remarks demanding changes be made to the state’s mask and vaccination mandates for students. Kemp’s office responded by calling such demands “pandemic politics,” and reaffirmed its stance that there would be no statewide mask mandate.



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