

“It’s sickening to know these people are willing to risk kids’ lives”

Florida parents and teachers denounce “herd immunity” policies of new Surgeon General

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Educators and parents throughout Florida have responded with immense opposition to the appointment of Dr. Joseph Ladapo to the post of the state’s surgeon general and his far-right denunciations of masking, vaccinations, and other crucial protocols meant to slow down the pandemic. Those working within schools and parents forced to send their children off to them are deeply hostile to the “herd immunity” approach promoted by Ladapo and his appointer, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis.

The appointment of Ladapo is a calculated strategy on the part of DeSantis and an expression of the politics of fascistic layers within the political establishment opposed to even limited mitigation measures. Ladapo’s appointment is in fact aimed at providing pseudo-scientific cover for DeSantis’ criminal approach to the resurgence of the pandemic driven by the deadlier Delta variant that has pushed the state’s cumulative death toll above 55,000.

Ladapo, a former medical researcher for UCLA, has promoted the principles of the Great Barrington Declaration and the position that infections should spread naturally to create a mythical “herd immunity.” In several public statements he has echoed the stance of the governor on public health measures, expressing the unscientific and reactionary belief that vaccinations and masks are encroachments on personal “liberty” while disparagingly referring to the widespread fear surrounding the pandemic as “COVID mania.”

Last week, Ladapo issued an emergency mandate that only parents can decide if children should be quarantined when exposed to someone who tested positive for the virus. In supporting this decision, DeSantis called quarantines and isolation protocols “disruptive” and “incredibly damaging.”

Notwithstanding their feigned concern for the wellbeing of children, the real motive behind the drive to eliminate quarantines is to ensure as many parents return to workplaces as possible, in order to resume the flow of profit-making for corporations and big business. Invocations of

“disruptions” are not based on concern for classroom learning, but express fears that such measures will be a hindrance to the wealth accumulation of a ruling class that has seen its fortunes skyrocket during the pandemic.

Florida has served as one of the most egregious examples in the US of the “herd immunity” strategy in action. In August alone, the state registered more than 9,000 deaths, accounting for one in every six of the state’s deaths throughout the pandemic.

Despite being half the size of California, which has been a major hotspot for the resurgence of the disease, Florida had three times as many COVID-19 deaths in August. According to data collected by the *Tampa Bay Times*, the state recorded nearly 90 deaths for every 100,000 residents, the highest among the six largest states in the country.

The only expression of concern for the health and safety of children has in fact come from teachers and parents in the state who are outraged by the policies promoted by Ladapo and DeSantis, and rightfully worried about the impact the pandemic will have on young people as the fall semester deepens. In more than a dozen comments under Facebook posts that included a *World Socialist Web Site* article exposure of Ladapo, countless educators testified to the enormous popular revulsion to the homicidal policies being pursued by the government.

One educator from Winter Haven commented on the ominous prospect of mass transmission within classrooms, saying, “As a teacher I say this all day. It’s a nightmare and when you think it can’t get any worse, it does.”

Another commentator expressed concern for elderly people who are guardians for young children and are especially vulnerable to serious infection. She said, “And many kids go home to their grandparents! I would just homeschool my kids if mine were school age. For those claiming religious exemption, your freedom of religion does not include human sacrifice.”

Another parent spoke on the irrationality of having

children clustered in small classrooms that would give ample opportunity for the spread of COVID-19, writing, “I feel like every day I’m sending my kid off without seat belts and just hoping for the best.” They added, “Hoping it’s not us that the worst happens to, but feeling terrible knowing the worst is going to happen to someone.” Placing blame directly on DeSantis, Ladapo, and other right-wing figures for carrying out this brutal policy, she said, “It’s sickening to know these people are willing to risk kids’ lives to prove political points, I’m really struggling lately.”

The ubiquitous anger over the state government’s attempts to downplay the danger of COVID-19 and dispense with health guidelines is all the more legitimate given the current disastrous spread of the pandemic. On Thursday, Florida revealed an additional 938 deaths and 4,781 cases of its backlog data to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Despite reductions in the state’s reported fatalities, hospitalizations, and cases over the past week, virus numbers are still extraordinarily higher than they were in the early- to mid-summer period before the reopening of schools. In the past seven days, the state has added 272 deaths and 5,612 cases on average to the daily cumulative total, according to a *Miami Herald* analysis of CDC data. On September 1, Florida was averaging 263 daily deaths, demonstrating that there has not been any significant change in transmission and death rates over the past month.

While the appointment of Ladapo represents a new stage in the ruling class pursuit of the “herd immunity” strategy, parents and teachers in the majority of Florida’s school districts have been grappling with the irresponsible policies of county officials ever since schools reopened in late August. Many have abandoned health restrictions altogether, with both Democratic and Republican-controlled districts embracing the mandates of DeSantis by banning masking on campuses and repudiating social distancing and isolation measures.

One commentator under the WSWs article wrote, “our district is no longer paying any attention.” She continued, “No quarantines. No masks. Just infection and open breathing everywhere. It is not sustainable, and it is mentally harrowing every single day.”

One social media post expressed agreement with the quote of a parent referenced in the WSWs article, saying, “I agree with the comment, ‘it’s like living in the twilight zone.’ As a grandparent and a former substitute teacher, I will never understand how anyone could put children at risk. It breaks my heart.”

On Friday, parents and workers throughout the globe participated in and expressed support for a one-day school strike in Britain aimed at keeping children home to protest

against the reckless reopening of schools that has placed young peoples’ lives at risk. Messages of solidarity poured in from working people in Britain and worldwide, with videos posted on Twitter by the main organizer of the protest, Lisa Diaz, receiving hundreds of thousands of views.

The determination of those who called for and engaged in the school strike, combined with the massive opposition to unsafe re-openings in Florida and elsewhere, demonstrates the necessity for an alternative course in the fight against the pandemic and the sinister policies of the ruling class.

This alternative will not be found, however, in any political tendency that serves in the interests of the capitalist class, the Democrats and Republicans above all, or the reactionary trade unions. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), headed by Randi Weingarten, have in fact collaborated dutifully with the major parties to send children back into classrooms and suppress opposition against the back-to-school drive throughout the pandemic.

The AFT co-hosted a town hall meeting Thursday with the far-right parents’ group Open Schools USA and Great Barrington Declaration author Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, providing a free platform to fascistic opponents of COVID-19 vaccinations, mask mandates and all mitigation measures in schools. Bhattacharya is a close ally of DeSantis, and serves as state’s witness in a lawsuit last year, providing pseudo-scientific justifications for the full reopening of schools before the vaccines were even developed.

The initiative of the October 1 strike is the spearhead for the building of independent rank-and-file committees among teachers and every section of the working class, to fight for scientifically-guided policies to put an end to the pandemic. It raised the necessity for a strategy of eradicating COVID-19 through the shutdown of schools and non-essential production, combined with mass vaccination, universal testing and contact tracing. Such a fight must be bound up with a struggle against the entire capitalist economic order and its policy of social murder. All Florida educators, parents and workers who wish to take up this struggle should sign up today to build a rank-and-file committee in your area.



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