

The growing toll of COVID-19 on children in North Carolina

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In the state of North Carolina, as in the rest of the United States, the proportion of confirmed cases of COVID-19 attributable to children rose sharply in August and September. The number of new cases in children has remained high into October and November in spite of newly available vaccines for younger children.

While case rates have diminished in the South as summer heat has given way to milder temperatures that have allowed people to resume outdoor activities, there are early indications in colder areas of the US that winter weather will likely bring with it a resurgence of high case rates throughout the country. Already, North Carolina has seen cases plateau at around 1,800 confirmed infections per day and the fall in hospitalizations seen since the beginning of September has bottomed out at a seven-day average of 1,158. An average of 18 people are dying every day across the state from COVID-19.

More than 1.5 million people have tested positive for COVID-19 in the state of North Carolina since the beginning of the pandemic and there have been a total of 18,482 confirmed deaths.

Neither North Carolina Democratic Governor Roy Cooper nor the state's Republican-dominated legislature have taken any significant action to protect the lives of the population from COVID-19. Lockdown measures imposed in March 2020 were lifted within months and many workplaces, including meatpacking plants, were never closed in the first place.

The state's miserably inadequate COVID-19 vaccination program has utterly failed to stem the tide of coronavirus deaths. September of this year was the third deadliest month of the pandemic with 2,056 recorded deaths, surpassed only by the 2,090 deaths in December 2020 and 3,024 deaths in January this year. Only 53 percent of the state's residents are considered fully vaccinated, and many residents with waning immunity remain ineligible for a booster by CDC and FDA criteria.

Schools and factories remain the major transmission hubs for the virus. The latest report from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) states that there have been 2,132 cases and three deaths at child care facilities, and K-12 schools have seen 6,629 cases of COVID-19 and one death. In K-12 schools, there have been 185 clusters, defined as a minimum of five cases with illness onset or initial positive results within 14 days. In child care facilities there have been 11 clusters. Children under five are still ineligible to be vaccinated.

Throughout the state, the country, and the world, the long-term consequences of the disease in those who recover remain unknown. However, preliminary evidence suggests that a significant proportion of the population that has been wantonly exposed to the virus through the criminal policies pursued by the political establishment may suffer life-long disability due to a syndrome that has come to be known as Long COVID, which includes a range of symptoms resulting from the debilitating effects of COVID-19 on multiple organ systems. Moreover, preliminary research suggests that even many of those who have suffered only relatively mild symptoms during their initial illness, and who may not yet be aware of any lasting effects, are left with cognitive deficits, measurably decreased grey matter in the brain, and diminished kidney function. They may never recover.

A 12-year-old girl named Wednesday Lynch is one tragic example of the growing toll that Long COVID is taking on North Carolinians. Lynch, who is being treated at a University of North Carolina COVID-19 recovery clinic, has been battling symptoms of Long COVID for a full year. Her mother Melisa told CBS 17 News that that "she was a straight-A student" and "an all-star cheerleader, always bouncing off the walls and bouncing off the trampoline."

In September 2020, when Wednesday was 11 years old,

she contracted COVID-19. At that time, there were no vaccines available yet. Her initial mild symptoms quickly gave way to a high fever and seizures.

As a consequence of her illness, Lynch now suffers from Tachycardia, Dysautonomia, and Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome. She also experiences “brain fog, confusion, memory loss, and cognitive loss with learning,” according to her mother. Because of these difficulties, Wednesday was “tested for accommodations” and it turned out “she was performing at 31 percent and two grade levels behind.”

Part of what makes the continuing loss of life and health so tragic is that it is almost entirely avoidable, and its future consequences remain incalculable. It is not the virus alone that is to blame but the criminal reopening policies of the political representatives of the ruling class, which have allowed the virus to spread. Governments at every level have consistently placed the profit interests of private corporations before human life, demanding that children return to unsafe schools and daycares so that their parents can return to work.

Moreover, as immunologist Dr. Anthony Leonardi recently told the WSWS, emerging research raises the terrifying possibility that the cognitive deficits associated with Long COVID might not only persist but worsen significantly over time.

The policies of Governor Cooper and the North Carolina state legislature are in line with those of the Biden administration, which has, in all essential respects, continued and deepened the anti-science, homicidal policies pursued by the Trump administration.

While North Carolina schools have been provided with \$5.5 billion in COVID-19 relief funding from the federal government, most of this money remains unspent. Outdated air conditioning units and filtration or ventilation systems have not been replaced. Nor has the infrastructure for remote learning been revamped and improved. Instead, the ruling class and its political representatives have simply herded teachers, students and staff back into unsafe schools so that parents could be forced back into unsafe workplaces.

Many educators have voiced their frustrations with the dangerous policies of their school districts on the Facebook group North Carolina Teachers United. A teacher named Wendy said that she was retiring early because of “the lack of pay, respect, appreciation, parent involvement, etc.” Many other teachers say they are retiring early as well because of the impossible working conditions. The reckless indifference to human life

exhibited by the ruling elite has created a situation in which it is all but impossible for teachers to concentrate on developing young minds for the future. Instead, they are faced with hazard after hazard and complete disregard for safety.

In response to the recent decline in case counts, a number of school districts have loosened contact tracing and quarantine protocols, preparing the way for another surge. For example, the board of education in Union County southeast of Charlotte voted on September 13 to do away with the District’s COVID-19 contact tracing and allow students and staff in quarantine to return if they do not test positive for the virus.

Another educator, Ellen, expressed concern on the North Carolina Teachers United group over the optional masking in her district, remarking “we had three schools with clusters just last week. It’s difficult to comprehend.” Other teachers responded and pointed to the fact that the winter holidays are just around the corner and increased travel and gatherings will compound the spread caused by these reckless policies.

The growing frustrations of educators are entirely justified. Twenty months into the pandemic the time is long overdue for an end to the criminal and homicidal policies of the ruling class and its political representatives in local, state and national government. However, both the Democrats and the Republicans are fundamentally incapable of changing course because their entire function is the defense of the profits of the large corporations and financial speculators.

Conversely, human lives, not corporate profits, are the first priority of the working class. It therefore falls to teachers and other workers themselves to fight for an alternative. North Carolina teachers and other workers must build rank-and-file safety committees in their schools and workplaces as part of the global initiative of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to eliminate COVID-19 and end the pandemic.



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