Tennessee governor signs reactionary legislation aimed at forcing the population to “live with the virus”

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As the highly contagious Omicron variant of COVID-19 is spreading and cases of Delta are beginning to rise again in Tennessee, Republican Governor Bill Lee has banned mask and vaccine mandates while providing a safety net for workers who quit their jobs to avoid employer vaccination requirements. After the deadly back-to-school surge which killed 120,000 Americans from late-August to mid-October, Tennesseans are about to enter the winter holiday season grievously under-protected against the latest wave of the pandemic.

This latest legislation is the product of fascistic elements in the Republican-dominated State Legislature who knowingly passed a bill that flagrantly defies federal law in the name of “states’ rights” and “individual freedoms.” Despite admonitions from major multinational companies and business groups to rethink the bill, Lee signed it into law on November 12.

Ford Motor Company, which benefited from the passage of the law—which includes a $9 million package to assist the building of an electric vehicle facility in Tennessee—was among the capitalist interests that lobbied lawmakers to walk back the restrictions on mask and vaccination mandates. Legislators reversed themselves at the last minute to allow private businesses to mandate masks and proof of vaccination, no doubt because of Ford’s $5.6 billion investment in the state.

Despite the governor’s own aides warning legislators an hour before voting that the bill violates federal law, the legislation passed in the early hours of October 30, giving the state’s governor virtual dictatorial powers to block COVID-19 mitigation efforts in the state’s schools and workplaces.

In an email Associated Press published by the governor’s legislative counsel warned that the bill violates the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which protects workers and children with disabilities from exclusion and unequal treatment in their workplaces and schools.

Moreover, the law puts businesses and agencies who receive federal funding in direct conflict with the federal government. Their compliance with the Tennessee law would result in fines and the withholding of federal funds. This would jeopardize the state’s health care system, already overburdened by the continuing pandemic, which relies on monies from federal Medicare and Medicaid programs; moreover, agencies that rely on federal money to serve the poor and working class would be devastated by the loss of funding and the onus of fines.

The law all but guarantees that local government agencies and school districts will never be able to protect workers and students from infection from COVID-19 with even the most limited mitigations. Mask mandates can be implemented locally for 14 days at a time and only when new cases of the virus reach 1,000 per 100,000 residents. This ludicrously high number has never been reached in a single county or school district in Tennessee. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers a “high” community case count to be 99 new cases per 100,000. By this measure, much of Tennessee is already currently considered “high.”

Additionally, the November 12 law will allow those who quit their job because of employer COVID-19 vaccine requirements to collect unemployment benefits. This provision is particularly loathsome as Governor

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Lee opted out of the $300 federal unemployment benefit in May 2021, which allowed low-wage workers to stay home during the pandemic. Aid to self-employed workers who lost their income during the pandemic was also terminated by Lee's decision to shun "short-term, federal fixes."

This legislation represents the most recent attempt on the part of far-right forces in Tennessee to force the population to "live with the virus." In August, Governor Lee signed a law allowing parents to opt out of school mask mandates even as cases were rising at rates that exceeded the 2020-2021 winter surge. However, federal judges in three counties overturned the law on the basis of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

In Knox County, where parents of children with special needs sued and won the reinstatement of a mask mandate in federal court, elected officials at the state and local level called on residents to defy the federal court order. Far-right community leaders involved in the January 6 coup attempt in Washington D.C. led a small contingent of parents from wealthy neighborhoods to "bring Knox County Schools to a screeching halt." They did so on September 27 when schools closed in response to the outcry from anti-mask groups. For the remainder of the week, school district police and the county sheriff turned a blind eye as protesters shouted and waved signs on school property while teachers and students arrived for school.

More recently, Maury County Mayor Andy Ogles, along with Republican officials and mayors in the county, declared a State of Emergency in reaction to the federal mandate that all hospitals that receive Medicare and Medicaid funds must have all their staff vaccinated by January 4, 2022. Ogles called the federal mandate an "abuse of power by the executive branch of the United States." He continued, "If there is ever a time to unite, stand together and fight, it is now." At the county mayor's side during the screed was State Representative Scott Cepicky, also from Maury County, who was responsible for the firing of the state's top vaccination official, Dr. Michelle Fiscus over a campaign aimed at teens that encouraged those 14 and older to get vaccinated.

The increasingly anti-democratic rightward trajectory of sections of the ruling class is a response to growing opposition in the working class. The policy of deliberate mass infection of the working class in the midst of rising social inequality threatens to provoke a social explosion.

Workers, already suffering the effects of decades of stagnant wages and austerity policies, have borne the brunt of the illness and deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic while the global elite have seen their wealth increase to record levels from the safety of their mansions and penthouses. Leaders across the globe, representing every faction of the ruling class, have promoted the pseudoscientific lie that SARS-CoV-2 can be expected to evolve rapidly into something more akin to the common cold, so that workers will be able to resume their pre-pandemic routines.

On the contrary, the irresponsible policies of the ruling elite have allowed the virus to continue to mutate into increasingly more dangerous strains as evidenced by the Omicron variant first detected in southern Africa, which is more infectious than any previous strain of the virus thus far. Contrary to the repeated forecasts of the various political representatives of the ruling class, the "herd immunity" that could supposedly be produced through a combination of vaccination and prior infection has not materialized. Instead, immunity continues to be outpaced by ever more aggressive and evasive strains of the virus.

The reactionary character of the ruling elite, expressed by the complete indifference to the threat posed by the Omicron variant, the ongoing promotion of murderous herd immunity policies and the disregard for democratic rights—all at the behest of Wall Street and the large corporations—has brought the working class into an ever more direct confrontation with the capitalist system.

We call on all Tennessee workers and workers throughout the United States who want to join the fight for a scientifically guided strategy to eliminate COVID-19 and end the pandemic to register for our upcoming meeting, The Global Workers Inquest into COVID-19 and the Growing Political Movement against the Pandemic.

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