

Amid record-breaking COVID infections, Pennsylvania governor and teacher unions call for in-person learning to continue

Douglas Lyons
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Pennsylvania has seen a massive surge of COVID cases over the holidays, shattering previous records and being fueled by the highly transmissible Omicron variant. The state had three consecutive record-breaking days of new infections last week—Wednesday, 17,520 cases, Thursday, almost 19,500, and Friday, more than 23,000, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Health pandemic dashboard.

Total cases have surpassed the 2 million mark and over 36,500 people in the state have died. The counties with the highest infection rate adjusted to cases per 1,000 residents are Northampton, Delaware, Adams, Philadelphia, and York, all of which are in the southern to southeast portion of the state.

Although the hospitalization rate has not eclipsed last year's high yet, it is expected to in the coming weeks and is currently at a catastrophic 7-day average of over 5,200. Hospitals are being inundated with patients in need of life-saving treatment, and the state's health care system cannot keep up.

Dr. Gerald Maloney, Chief Medical Officer of Geisinger Health System, the largest in the state, pleaded, “the healthcare system in Pennsylvania is at the brink of collapse.” The situation is so dire that Dr. Maloney sees the possibility of refrigeration trucks holding dead bodies in the parking lot, reminiscent of New York City in the first wave of the pandemic.

In an interview on National Public Radio, Dr. Essie Reed at Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center in Wilkes-Barre, said she is waiting for the “Jenga tower to fall,” referring to the popular children's game. Makeshift beds are being constructed in hallways to care for patients, emergency room wait times range from 10 to 16 hours, and medical supplies are running out.

Penn State Health went so far as to start rationing emergency-room care, telling sick people who are having “difficulty breathing, sustained higher fever, confusion or the inability to stay hydrated” to schedule an appointment with their respective physicians, adding, “and a visit to a hospital emergency department may be appropriate.”

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is sending in additional resources and medical staff—nurses,

doctors, and respiratory therapists—to relieve stress on hospitals and health care workers, but it is not enough to cover the whole state and won't make much of an impact. Only York and Scranton hospitals will be getting help, receiving an inadequate 30 acute care beds between them around January 3 or after.

The COVID disaster unfolding across the state is the direct product of unsafe school openings, spearheaded by Democratic Governor Tom Wolf and the union apparatus from the local and state level to the national level under President Biden and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten.

Wolf called for the full reopening of schools in the fall during the height of the Delta surge without mandating any mitigation measures, although even with mitigations in place schools are still major vectors of the disease.

In an effort to wash his hands of mounting infections and deaths, Wolf engaged in a political charade, asking the Republican-controlled state legislature to pass a mask mandate, even though it had no chance to become law. A couple of weeks after schools saw skyrocketing COVID cases, Wolf was compelled to issue a masking rule to smother growing opposition to face-to-face learning.

On December 10, however, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court tossed the mask mandate out, grounding its decision on a dubious technicality: whether the Acting Health Secretary, Alison Beam, has the legal authority to impose a mask mandate on school boards.

Pennsylvania state senator Jake Corman and far-right fascistic forces in the state directed the lawsuit. This legally sanctioned unmasking of kids followed another far-right Republican-led campaign to strip executive powers during public health emergencies.

While Republicans proscribe all public health measures that impinge on the profits of business, Wolf has relied on the corporatist trade unions to funnel kids into unsafe classrooms so parents can return to work and produce profits for the corporations.

All the major teachers' unions in the state have endorsed Wolf's full reopening of schools, including the AFT, the

Pennsylvania State Education Association, and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT).

This has found tragic expression in at least 20 children dying in the state and over 1,000 across the nation. The latest child death, which are usually unreported in the corporate media, was healthy 17-year-old high school student, Alayna Thach, at Olney Charter High School in Philadelphia, where teachers initiated a wildcat sickout strike to oppose deadly COVID conditions in schools.

Making no public statement on the death of Alayna, PFT union president Jerry Jordan has called for the resumption of “safe” in-person learning once the holiday break ends on January 11, despite cases skyrocketing throughout the city and in schools from the Omicron variant, which is more severe in children, most of whom are unvaccinated.

According to the CDC, between December 22-28, a record average of 378 children under 18 years old were hospitalized each day with COVID, which is higher than the Delta-surge peak of 342 per day reached in September.

To justify the continuation of the unsafe reopening of schools after the huge surge of cases over the holidays, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Dr. Rochelle Walensky and National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Director Dr. Anthony Fauci went on national television to downplay the record-breaking rise in pediatric cases, claiming kids are being hospitalized with COVID and not because of COVID, in a barefaced lie dug up from the far-right.

In an interview last Wednesday, Jordan reiterated the falsehood that schools can be safely reopened, blaming the spike in cases on the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) for not following through on safety measures: “the district needs to put effective mitigation strategies in place for schools to be safe for children and for staff. And if they are not able to do that then there is a need to go virtual until such time as the district can make sure that buildings are safe.”

Jordan dismisses the fact that the PFT proclaimed “victory” when it agreed with the SDP to send teachers back into COVID-infested classrooms last winter, arguing that wholly inadequate mitigation measures keep schools safe, in the face of massive opposition from rank-and-file members and parents who forced the PFT-SDP to backpedal twice on reopening plans.

Before the holiday break, handfuls of Philadelphia schools have moved to a virtual learning “pause,” exploding the argument, advocated by the political establishment and the union bureaucracy, that schools can be reopened safely.

Not fooled by Jordan’s finger-pointing, educators went on social media to denounce the unsafe in-person learning rubber-stamped by the PFT and SDP. One wrote, “The union should have fought for schools to go virtual prior to break. They knew there was a COVID outbreak and did nothing.” Another educator responded: “Exactly! And they already knew [SDP Superintendent William] Hite’s stance! This is just all to save

face!” One worker caustically asked “So PFT, what are you doing to avert more disaster here?”

One teacher expressed outrage over the silence of the PFT: “... why are they saying we are going back in person. My air purifier has not WORKED since SEPTEMBER. And there has been NO sanitation (other than what I have done and paid for) in my room at ALL!!! I don’t feel safe, I don’t feel heard, I DO NOT feel that the job I give my all to and for cares about me, my health, my safety or that of my family and my students. WE DESERVE BETTER!!!”

One worker wrote about the horrendous conditions in schools sanctioned by the PFT: “All schools are not safe. There are schools with limited mask distribution, no or very limited cleaning. Some schools [have] no nurses so there is no one to test the students. Limited staff to be able to ensure students wear their masks. Limited to no contact tracing for athletes.”

In a similar post, another worker wrote, “Let’s be clear ... schools aren’t safe right now. The numbers are out of control and worse than they were at the beginning of the pandemic so there’s nothing they can do to keep us safe. Kids aren’t being tested and COVID is spreading like a wildfire in our schools.”

Massive opposition to this warehousing of kids in poorly ventilated, COVID-infested schools is pervasive, but it must be directed in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions and the Democratic Party. This is why educators in Pennsylvania and elsewhere have formed a new fighting organization, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (PERFSC).

The PERFSC issued a statement in December to stop the spread of COVID and save lives, demanding an immediate switch to fully remote learning in public, private and charter schools, combined with the closure of all non-essential production, with full income protection for all workers impacted; for a multitrillion-dollar public health campaign of vaccination, testing, contact tracing and isolation of infected individuals; and for a globally organized campaign to eliminate and eradicate COVID-19.

To join the PERFSC and join the fight, email the committee at paedrankandfile@gmail.com, text (412) 336-8245, or visit this page.



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