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Redondo Beach, California high school students walk out amid mass COVID-19 infections

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Last Wednesday, January 12, hundreds of students from Redondo Union High School (RUHS), in Redondo Beach, California, walked out in protest against the school’s limited mitigation measures as hundreds of students have tested positive for COVID-19. Despite facing threats from the school administration and right-wing elements, anywhere from 150–350 students participated in the walkout.

The militant actions of the students are part of a global wave of resistance led by educators, students and workers against the homicidal “herd immunity” policies enacted by capitalist governments the world over. Since the start of 2022, teachers in Seattle, Oakland, San Francisco, as well as thousands of students in Chicago, New York City, Boston and other cities, have participated in walkouts to save lives in the face of mass infection.

As is the case throughout the US, the emergence of the Omicron variant coupled with the government’s refusal to enact any public health measures that cut into corporate profits has resulted in record-breaking case counts and overflowing hospitals in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

According to *New York Times* COVID-19 tracker, there are now an average of nearly 42,000 daily new cases in Los Angeles County, where Redondo Beach is located, while the number of daily deaths is beginning to climb, averaging 34 deaths per day over the last week.

Limited mitigation measures are being rolled back as the entire political establishment demands that children be herded back into schools for in-person learning, no matter the level of infection. In response, students have taken it upon themselves to fight for their lives.

Michael Lee-Chang, a 17-year old senior at RUHS who helped promote the walk-out and was threatened for doing so, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* on the courageous actions taken by him and his fellow students last week. The interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Jacob Crosse: Hi, Michael, thanks for taking the time to speak with me. Let’s start at the beginning, how did this come about,

what motivated you to take action?

Michael Lee-Chang: It started on Friday, January 7. A message was sent out by RUHScovid, which is run by two anonymous students who wish to remain so, out of fear of repercussions. It was their idea that students should not show up to school on January 10. This would hurt the school’s funding.

It was clear that not many students were comfortable walking out that day so it was scrapped, not many people were catching on. Over the weekend, the students who run the RUHScovid account came to me to see if I would promote another event. I have been running an Instagram account where I have been communicating school policies with students since the school does such a terrible job with communication. There are about 3,000 students at the school and my account has about 4,500 followers.

So the students who run RUHScovid asked me if they planned another walk-out, would I support it and promote it on my Instagram. I said sure.

Before I go further, I understand some will say that planning a mass walkout is just another super-spreader event. I think students gathering in masses, masked and outside, is very powerful. It sends a message. On Monday, January 10, we started spreading the message across social media. On Tuesday, I posted on my Instagram account and a Nextdoor account I have, so that parents would be notified that way too.

Last Tuesday, the Redondo Union School District board of education held a board meeting and I went to share some words on what has been going on at RUHS.

Before the meeting however, at about 5 p.m. I get a call from the district office, from Dr. Anthony Taranto. He is the Executive Director of Student Services. He kept interrogating me, telling me “You need to call this off, the walkout.”

JC: So you were threatened by an administration official to cancel the walkout within a day of posting it on your Instagram account?

MLC: Yes. They told me, the only way to “prove my innocence” was to find out who runs the RUHScovid account and turn them

in. Dr. Taranto kept demanding to know the identities of the walkout organizers and told me to find out who they were. I had to send him a bunch of screenshots from my computer. He was interrogating me the whole time, forcing me to defend myself. I told him I'm not the one planning this.

I was surprised they called me. I found out they had called my mom beforehand, while she was at work, in order to get my phone number. She doesn't speak English very well.

JC: The district didn't have your phone number so they called your mom and manipulated her into giving out your phone number? And they wanted you to inform on your fellow students who came to you for help?

MLC: Yes. I told them no, that's insane.

Prior to having the phone call with the district, I didn't have a strong opinion on whether or not I was going to participate in the walkout. However, after that phone call, which rubbed me the wrong way, I knew I had to support it.

While many students are worried about COVID-19, not everyone had the same goals. For many students the walkout was an opportunity to vent frustrations that have been building against the district for some time.

After the call, I did end up speaking at the board meeting, I told them there are lots of guidelines not being followed. So on January 12, during our home period, which is like a silent study hall, no actual instruction goes on, students just read or do homework, we planned to walk out. At 10:15 a.m. KTLA sent a news helicopter which caught the attention of students.

I can't give an exact estimate, but I would say between 150–350 students walked out. I didn't find out till afterwards, but apparently on Wednesday morning the principal sent out an email to teachers saying to let students out.

After the walkout, I guess my phone number got passed around, because I received a phone call from Dr. Steven Keller, our superintendent, who said he wanted to speak to me in-person and get the students' perspective on the health and safety of everyone on campus.

So on Thursday, January 13, I attended a meeting with Dr. Keller and the president of the board of education, Raymurr Flinn. I wasn't allowed to record the meeting, but they let me bring my girlfriend along, so at least it was two versus two. I asked them about shutting down the schools and going to remote learning until cases subside. The first day back we had 200 positive cases of COVID-19, and within a week it shot up to 500 cases, out of 3,000 students. Right now we have between 350–430 active cases.

They told me that they don't have the authority to do that, that it comes from LA County. I asked them, if you had the authority, would you have shut down schools? They told me, no, they wouldn't shut down and that they don't see hybrid learning as an option.

JC: It is the same across the country. No matter the level of infection, the mantra is schools will not close under any circumstances. In many cases, students' "mental health" is cited as a reason for why schools cannot close. What do you think about this? Do you feel safe?

MLC: No, I don't feel safe. The day after the walkout, a conservative student threw a milk carton at me in the lunchroom.

Conservative parents have voiced their opposition to me and the walkout. Students are still testing positive, or coming into close contact with a positive case and coming to school. There is no coherent policy, nothing is being followed. The same students have to be told every day to wear their masks properly, there are no consequences.

I know I have been sitting next to students who have been in close contact or tested positive recently. There was one case where a student's entire family, siblings and parents, tested positive, but that one student didn't, so the school said it was fine for them to come to school.

Even when students test positive, sometimes they don't know. Our school is incredibly divided on the issue. The parents get an email when their child tests positive or is in close contact, but some of the conservative parents, who don't believe COVID-19 is real, won't tell their kids and force them to go to school. I brought this up in my meeting with the superintendent.

When I spoke at the board meeting, the day before, the board downplayed the nature of COVID-19, how it spreads, how dangerous it is, claiming they understand it way better now than they did before. But that's not true, I just saw an article in the *New York Times* that talked about the increased risk of Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes for those infected. That is a life-long disease.

JC: The fact is the opposition to these criminal, anti-scientific policies is going to have to come from students like yourself. At the *World Socialist Web Site*, we have been organizing working class opposition to the "herd immunity" policies started by Trump and continued by Biden in the form of a network of rank-and-file committees. There is no "living with COVID-19." Rather, a policy of Zero COVID must be implemented on a global scale to end the pandemic.

Would you be interested in attending and promoting our upcoming West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meeting this Sunday?

MLC: Yes.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) encourages high school youth to contact us today to organize opposition to the deadly school reopening policies.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact