

Maryland students and teachers oppose school reopenings as state officials seek to force in-person classes at all costs

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19 January 2022

Amid a surge of infection driven by the Omicron variant of COVID-19, Maryland's Republican Governor Larry Hogan and the Democratic Party-controlled state government are resorting to ever more manipulative measures to keep businesses and schools operating in-person.

Maryland has seen more than 10,000 new cases each day since the new year started. An astounding 17,253 people tested positive on January 9. This number surpassed the previous record of 3,792 set last winter by over four times. Deaths are also beginning to climb with the seven day rolling average hitting 66 per day on January 17, an all time high, up from a low of 9 in early November.

ICU and acute hospital bed usage has increased seven-fold since before the holidays, and a number of hospitals have begun instituting emergency measures. The current level of testing is grossly inadequate with the positivity rate reaching 30 percent.

The surge had caused Baltimore City Public Schools to close 60 of its 155 schools at the beginning of the year, but by the end of the week the district had quickly reopened them. Outbreaks in Baltimore City schools have been covered up by the school board, leading to deaths. "We are being forced into school environments that are unsafe—due to overcrowding, limited access to testing, lack of school nurses, lack of proper masking—and are being gaslighted by leadership with promises of safety," a Baltimore City schoolteacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"Educators are at a breaking point and cannot keep this 'normal school year' pace in an environment that is anything but normal. We are more than capable of delivering high-quality instruction virtually," she

insisted.

This situation has been met by an increasing opposition within broad sections of the working class. In the heavily-populated Washington DC suburbs, Montgomery County bus drivers are continuing to remain home from their jobs. The county's Democratic Party-controlled executive requested the National Guard to keep the buses running.

'We don't have a break glass in case of emergency bus driver pool that's sitting somewhere being unused right now,' stated Montgomery County assistant administrative officer Dr. Earl Stoddard to Fox News. The official stated that "between 75 and I think 90 routes that have been affected that's a significant number of routes."

A petition started by high school students on Change.org calling for remote learning has garnered 18,200 signatures in a little over a week. "A month ago, [Montgomery County Public Schools] announced that if a school reached a student infection rate of 5 percent, the school would be reviewed by MCPS and the Department of Health and Human Services to go virtual for two weeks," it reads.

"One day after winter break, 11 schools were above the 5% rate, and two days later, 126 schools were." The petition charges county officials with jeopardizing students' safety, saying, "Not expecting this extreme upsurge, the county is scrambling now, trying to force us to stay in school, even though they know it is unsafe." A similar petition in neighboring Howard County has gotten 15,000 signatures.

Montgomery County, a "deep blue" stronghold of the Democratic Party, has been hit with a surge of COVID-19 cases, tallying 10,000 positive cases in its

school system within the first week of 2022. On Friday, January 7, the county announced that it would no longer be using a 5 percent positive threshold to determine if its schools should turn to remote learning.

“The state of Maryland does not currently recommend any automatic trigger or threshold for the suspension of in-person learning... Therefore, MCPS will no longer use a threshold of 5% or more of unrelated students and staff in a school who test positive in a 14-day period to consider a transition to virtual learning,” said Interim Superintendent Monifa McKnight of the about-face. The reversal came a day after the threshold had been set in place.

The mass opposition of students and faculty forced the Montgomery County Education Association, the local affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA), to pass a “no confidence” resolution last Wednesday by 94 percent against the school system administrators. Seeking to contain teacher and students’ anger and opposition to meaningless gestures, the resolution denounced the MCPS leadership for “dereliction of duty and a lack of competence” but made no specific demands of the officials.

In Carroll County, a shortage of bus drivers has led to increased talks of a sickout, as COVID-19 cases have peaked since the holidays at levels unseen during the previous months. On January 9, the county saw 343 cases, a number which dwarfs the peak of last winter season by many times over.

Dianne Grote, president of the Carroll County School Bus Contractors Association, told the *Baltimore Sun* that while some drivers are discussing a sickout, her organization is resolutely opposed because a “potential strike” could “jeopardize the association’s partnership with the school system and have a negative impact on students, parents, employees and businesses.”

In response to the unprecedented public health catastrophe and militant moods of the working class, the state government has tried to stack the deck in the favor of reopening. On January 4, Hogan declared a state of emergency intended to keep mass sickness and death from interfering with business.

Hogan made this explicit in his announcement, stating, “All of the emergency actions we are taking today are to keep our hospitals from overflowing, to keep our kids in school, and to keep Maryland open for business, and we will continue to take whatever actions

are necessary in the very difficult days and weeks ahead.”

Hogan also signed two executive orders the same day. The first relaxes licensing requirements for doctors and nurses, and the second does the same for emergency medical services. Hogan also deployed 1,000 members of the Maryland National Guard to provide manpower at state-run testing sites and to help with moving patients.

The move to rewrite and undermine public health policy comes after the Maryland Board of Education voted to allow counties to remove masks in schools as the Omicron variant first emerged. These reckless maneuvers have underscored the WSWS’s insistence that all sections of the American ruling class, both nationally and at state level, have sought to subordinate health and well-being to the profit system.

Furthermore, the collusion of both Democrats, National Education Association affiliates, and other groups at the municipal level with the Republican governor demonstrates that there is no faction of the capitalist class that will support a genuine fight against COVID-19.

The determination of officials throughout Maryland to keep schools open through a massive surge in cases as Omicron spreads is part of a global trend. In the face of a more infectious variant that is overwhelming health care systems, governments across the world are dropping any measures to contain the spread of the virus at all.

Maryland educators, students, and parents should contact the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and begin efforts to organize a genuine rank-and-file rebellion under the leadership of their own organizations. This committee works in concert with others like it across the globe to mobilize teachers and workers to put a stop to the capitalist class’s homicidal reopening policies and end the pandemic with a “zero COVID” elimination strategy.



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