

The global struggle to close schools and stop the pandemic

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Across Europe and North America, students, educators and parents are in open revolt against the “herd immunity” policies adopted by the richest capitalist governments. In response to the emergence of the highly infectious Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, these governments have deliberately allowed the virus to spread, with nearly one million children infected with COVID-19 last week in the US alone. A staggering three million people are now officially infected with the virus each day worldwide.

The fight against school reopenings is once again the spearhead of the global class struggle as masses of youth and educators are unwilling to accept further infections, hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19. The following struggles have erupted across Europe and Canada in the past week or are planned in the coming days:

- Thousands of teachers across **France** took part in local strikes throughout the country on Thursday, one week after a nationwide strike encompassing roughly 75 percent of all teachers, which closed half of the country’s primary schools.

- On Tuesday, students at more than 100 schools across **Austria** went on strike against the reckless school reopening policies

- Thousands of teachers, students and parents participated in nationwide demonstrations across **Greece** on Thursday, protesting the government’s pandemic policies and military buildup. Student occupations continue at many schools nationwide, despite students being intimidated and threatened by the government, police and right-wing forces.

- On Monday, hundreds of students at up to 90 schools across **Manitoba, Canada**, walked out of class due to unsafe conditions.

- In the **United Kingdom**, educators and parents have widely denounced the scrapping of mask wearing in secondary schools, which was the only remaining mitigation measure.

Throughout the United States, student strikes have taken place this week or are planned in the following major cities:

- Roughly 1,200 students in **Oakland, California**, initiated an indefinite school strike on Tuesday, winning the support of many teachers and parents.

- On Tuesday, hundreds of students from all eight **St. Paul, Minnesota**, high schools and some middle school students

walked out of classrooms. At least two Minnesota students and eight educators died last year after contracting COVID-19.

- Students at 18 high schools in **Montgomery County, Maryland**, are walking out today to demand online instruction for at least the next two weeks. Montgomery County Public Schools is the 14th largest school district in the US with over 160,000 students.

- In **Denver, Colorado**, students walked out of classes Thursday and sent out a letter outlining their concerns about COVID-19, stating that no student should risk his or her health for an education. Their petition garnered more than 500 signatures in two days, and students plan to continue their walkout until their demands are met.

- In **Round Rock, Texas**, students walked out of class Thursday to demand better safety precautions. More than 600 students signed a petition circulated around a few high schools and middle schools. The students demand a switch to fully remote learning, after there were more than 2,200 COVID-19 infections among students and staff last week alone.

- Roughly 200 Park City High School students in **Park City, Utah**, walked out on Thursday to protest the Utah State Senate moves to end mask mandates in schools.

- High school students in **Broward County, Florida**, are preparing a walkout on Monday. Broward County Public Schools is the sixth largest school district in the US with over 270,000 students and is where the 2018 Parkland school shooting took place.

- At **Northwestern University** outside Chicago, Illinois, a substantial section of students have refused to go back to in-person classes. A petition calling for online classes garnered more than 1,500 signatures but has been ignored by school administrators.

- Over the past two weeks, other significant demonstrations by students took place in **New York City, Chicago, Boston, Seattle** and other major cities across the country.

In each of these struggles, students and educators are fighting not just for their own safety but for that of their families and communities. Before the global surge of the Omicron variant, over 167,000 children in the US and over 1.5 million globally had lost a parent or primary caregiver to COVID-19, figures that are never referred to by the capitalist politicians, media

talking heads and union officials who hypocritically feign concern for the mental health of students.

In a September 2018 study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* titled “The Burden of Bereavement,” the authors examine the long-term effect of parental death. They note, “The loss of a parent is one of the most stressful events that a child can experience.” Over a 7-year period, bereaved children suffered “depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and functional impairment.”

How many such horrific, life-changing events have been caused by children catching COVID-19 in school and inadvertently infecting their loved ones? In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* which has gone viral on social media, a clinical psychologist from New Jersey related that this unspeakable tragedy has already befallen two students at a single campus since the start of the new year amid the Omicron surge.

The psychologist noted, “We came back from break on January 3. During that week, two of my students contracted COVID-19 at school. They brought it to their separate homes and inadvertently infected their mom and grandma (who was the primary caregiver), both of whom died last week.”

She stated, “I would argue that mental health has been compromised due to experiencing an ongoing collective trauma,” adding, “Children who lose their caregivers, specifically those who inadvertently infected them, are likely to experience survivor’s guilt, which is a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can lead to depression, anxiety, and difficulties with relationships.”

On Wednesday, in his second press conference since taking office one year ago, President Joe Biden made no reference to this reality and refused to even acknowledge the over 446,000 Americans who have died from COVID-19 since his inauguration. Instead, he painted a delusional portrait of contemporary America, stating, “we are in a better place than we’ve been and have been thus far, clearly better than a year ago.”

Asked about the mounting opposition to in-person learning across the US, Biden sought to downplay the crisis, saying, “Very few schools are closing. Over 95 percent are still open.” He declared emphatically, “We’re not going back—we’re not going back to lockdowns. We’re not going back to closing schools. Schools should stay open.”

Biden bluntly expressed the social interests behind these policies, stating, “Look, I’m a capitalist.” He later distanced himself from the pseudo-left Democrat Bernie Sanders, saying, “I’m not a socialist.”

Biden’s provocative statements are not accidental; they are deliberate and fundamental. The ruling class which he represents is indifferent to the health and needs of students, educators and their families. The only reason schools remain open is to serve as holding pens for children, so that their parents remain at work producing profits for the corporations.

He stated, “capitalism without competition is not capitalism, it’s exploitation.” But contrary to Biden’s claims, capitalism is based on the exploitation of the working class, which takes place through the extraction of surplus value during the production process. Regardless of the level of competition between capitalists, they are in fundamental agreement that this exploitation must continue, which animates their hostility to lockdowns and determination to keep schools open.

In order to carry forward their fight against the “herd immunity” policies pursued in the US and globally, students, educators and scientists must understand these fundamental truths. Any appeals to the powers that be will fall on deaf ears. Students and educators now entering into struggle must expand their strikes and build support within the working class, the great mass of humanity whose objective interests lie in ending the pandemic.

The most critical task is to forge a revolutionary socialist leadership. The ruling class and its political representatives have laid down the gauntlet and made clear they are willing to accept unending mass infection, suffering and death. Only the complete overturn of this rotten social order can put an end to this madness, save millions of lives, and lay the foundations for the building of a new society based on social equality and human progress.

We call on all students and young people to build chapters of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at your school or campus to develop socialist consciousness. These must be connected to the development of rank-and-file committees of educators and workers at every school and neighborhood, independent of the pro-capitalist unions, in order to carry out a broad-based struggle in the working class to stop the pandemic.



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