

# Pasadena City College faculty demonstrate against resumption of in-person learning

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On January 20, members of the Pasadena City College (PCC) Faculty Association demonstrated against the resumption of in-person instruction scheduled for Monday, January 24, despite spiking Omicron infection rates.

With a total enrollment of more than 25,000, the two-year community college services predominately working class youth and people already in the workforce seeking to upgrade their qualifications.

Full vaccination and boosters do not prevent breakthrough infections, and hospitals are overflowing. Students and faculty not only expose one another on campus, they also take the virus home with them and increase community transmission. This past week, Los Angeles County averaged more than 35,000 new cases and 50 deaths per day. Reopening campuses such as PCC will intensify the surge.

Similar Southern California schools are still weeks away from reopening. Cerritos College recently announced that in-person classes would not resume until March 7. For Whittier College, the date is February 21, and California State University, Northridge is slated to reopen on February 14.

In an interview with *Pasadena Now* during Thursday's demonstration, Communications Professor Mark Whitworth, the Faculty Association president, said of the demonstrators, who wore masks and stayed socially distant outside the administration building: "We're here to send a message that the faculty do not feel comfortable returning on the 24th of January. We'd much rather be in line with the other schools in the area and return a little bit later in February when the surge is over."

"We're here to call for a safe return to work," English Professor Mary-Erin Crook, the Faculty Association vice president, told the *Pasadena Star-*

*News*. "We're ready to go back but we are ready to go back when it is safe for the faculty, for the students and, really, for the whole community."

"Our students take public transportation. They come from all over L.A. County. They have family members who are working," Crook added. "And we feel that having 20,000 people here right now is not going to be safe."

Faculty and students should beware of attempts to limit the shutdown of in-person learning to a few extra weeks, and the role of the official unions in shutting down and selling out strikes, walkouts and protests by educators and students in Chicago, Boston, New York, Los Angeles and other cities. The struggle requires the building of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions that link up with the struggles at schools and campuses, as well as factories and other work locations, across the US and internationally.

Almost 80 percent of faculty who were polled supported delaying the resumption of in-person learning, which was discontinued almost two years ago. Simona Supekar, an English professor, told *Pasadena Now* that most of her students "said that they don't feel safe returning on Monday."

As of Saturday afternoon, an online petition organized by students had at least 1,800 signatures calling for the continuation of remote instruction.

"We should bear down and wait at least a couple more weeks to see where the trending data goes," said biology major Caressa Wong. "All of us have family members who are at higher risk for complications. I don't think anybody really wants to get sick. And with the high case count at the moment, a lot of students and a lot of faculty just don't feel like it's the right time to go back."

Wong encouraged students to join "the united front."

Reflecting the intractable demand of the ruling class that workers and students expose themselves to infections, Alexander Boekelheide, special assistant to the president and executive director of PCC's Office of Strategic Communications & Marketing, said, "The timing of the return to campus is not open for negotiation." According to Boekelheide, the January 24 reopening date has been planned since late December and the decision was announced to students, faculty and staff on January 1.

The Pasadena City College Board of Trustees supported the reopening of the campus at its board meeting last Wednesday. Student Trustee David Ramirez claimed that students were "firmly in support of allowing students that feel safe enough to do so return to campus next week." He claimed that "millions of dollars" had been spent on improvements to provide a safe campus.

Ramirez's two years on the board have been conducted almost entirely via teleconference due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During Wednesday's remote meeting, the Board of Trustees unanimously approved Resolution No. 705 (Authorizing Remote Teleconference Meetings of the Board of Trustees, its Regular Committees, and any other College Bodies as required by the Ralph M. Brown Act), through which the board elected to continue conducting its regular business and committee meetings using remote teleconferencing technology for the foreseeable future.

In October 2021, PCC announced that it would require all students, faculty and staff who come to the campus to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, with limited exceptions. According to a campus spokesperson, upgraded ventilation and filtration systems have been installed in all campus buildings. Additionally, custodial staff have supposedly established enhanced cleaning and sanitation processes to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Once the campus reopens, all students and employees will be subjected to weekly COVID-19 testing and masks are required both indoors and outdoors. The college also anticipates distributing more than 12,000 KN95 masks to students and staff at no cost.

None of these measures are adequate to stop the spread of the virus, which takes place via tiny aerosol particles that remain suspended in the air for hours on end. This has been demonstrated by the record increase

in infections and hospitalizations and soaring death rates all across the country since the reopening of schools and campuses. Infections, hospitalizations and deaths have risen disproportionately among children and teens.

Pasadena City College faculty, staff and students have joined the massive wave of protests that has swept the world against the reinstatement of in-person learning and against the "herd immunity" policies enacted by capitalist governments. Globally, 3 million people are infected with COVID-19 daily and no measures are being taken to eliminate the virus.

Capitalism does not care about the lives of educators and students and is indifferent to their health and needs. All students and educators need to enter into and support the working class struggle to eliminate COVID-19.

We call on students at PCC to contact us and build a chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) on the campus to connect with IYSSE chapters at other campuses, and for faculty to join the educator rank-and-file safety committees to carry out a broad-based struggle to end the COVID-19 pandemic.



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