One in thirteen students and staff at Central Valley school district contracted COVID-19

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California's Central Valley region has endured some of the state's highest rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths. The largely agricultural region is politically dominated by conservative agribusiness interests, whose disregard of basic COVID-19 safety procedures resulted in some of the worst outbreaks of 2020, for instance in the meatpacking industry. Presently, the region has some of the highest COVID-19 infection rates in the state as the Democratic Newsom administration works together with local Democratic and Republican politicians and school boards to gut the limited pandemic safety measures in place at K-12 schools.

Taylor, an educator in California's Central Valley, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions in a K-12 public school district in the region. Taylor's name has been changed as a cautionary measure. This discussion took place on January 19, 2022.

"We have roughly 1,000 cases documented in my district in the last three weeks, including staff (district office, bus drivers). We have roughly 12,000 students. Staff are ballpark probably another 1,000. With staff and students, we've had between 80-130 cases per day."

This horrific figure, representing nearly one in ten students and staff in the district, is unquestionably an undercount of total infections given the lack of universal testing and contact tracing in the district. "There is no regular testing," Taylor continued. "If you're a staff member, you test weekly if you're unvaccinated. Students have to test weekly if they are on a sports team. They have to test if they have symptoms, a fever, or they can stay at home for 10 days. They aren't doing contact tracing anymore. The district says there's no feasible way for them to do it."

"As far as I'm aware, masking is still required," Taylor continued. However, "Our superintendent told us not to have large gatherings, and then we were still having in-person parent informational meetings for two nights in person. It's very contradictory information.

"We started tracking cases in January of 2021. That was when we were still shut down. We weren't in person. At least a third of all cases since then have been this last couple of weeks, which is insane to me.

"We have between 20 percent and 25 percent of our kids in the district out. The lowest we had was only 72 percent of our kids present last Friday.

"I have friends who are teaching out of their jurisdiction because they have to. My friend is a music teacher, and they had her subbing in a fourth-grade classroom and canceled music because they needed a sub (in another district)."

Describing the effect of the current COVID-19 surge on the region's health care system, Taylor explained, "The hospitals in the Fresno area sent out an SOS message saying please get vaccinated, wear your mask, get boosted. Our ICUs, our ERs are full. They sent it out begging people to be mindful."

Last week, hospital bed occupancy averaged 91.3 percent in Fresno County, according to TheCalifornian.com. This suggests that at times, hospitals are forced to turn away patients they would otherwise admit for urgent treatment.

Speaking on the likely effects of the current COVID-19 surge on health care workers, Taylor argued, "I think what's going to happen is what's happened for the last year or two is a mass exodus from the health care system. I would quit and find a new profession as well."

Taylor's own experience contracting COVID-19 this month illustrates the district's abandonment of any

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effort to prevent mass infection. “Our district does rapid testing, not PCR [polymerase chain reaction]. If you come up positive on a rapid, you do a PCR. I showed up negative on a rapid last week because I wasn’t feeling well. I took a PCR and it showed up positive.

“I was told that if I didn’t have symptoms, I could come back in five days. Since I do have symptoms, they told me to come back after 10 days. They said if my symptoms were not improving after 10 days, I would have to get a doctor’s note to come back.

“I don’t have paid time. I have to take unpaid time right now because we don’t have COVID leave in our district. I’m doing what I think is the responsible thing to do and taking unpaid time to quarantine my full 10 days and more if I need to because I don’t think it’s responsible to go to work sick.”

“In our area, we’re less than 50 percent vaccinated. Speaking from personal experience,” Taylor explained, “I’m vaccinated and boosted, and I’ve been quite sick. I can’t imagine if I’ve gotten the other one what would have happened.”

Taylor explained the varying responses to mass infection among local parents and children, ranging from demoralized resignation to extreme concern “There are a bunch of people who say let it run its course and let it burn through and then we can go back to normal. We have some kids and families who are calling us panicked and trying to put their kids in independent study, but it’s full so they’re all on waitlists. There are some sites where the kids are waiting for this all to be done so they don’t have to wear their masks anymore and we have other kids who are terrified of being at school.”

California’s Democrat-led government has tied school funding to in-person attendance, which has led many schools to severely curtail remote learning options.

Taylor voiced support for the student and educator strikes in Oakland, “I like the idea of them and I’m happy that the students are supporting the fact that staff are not being taken care of and assisted. God, I wish that would be happening here. I think it’s ironic that the Oakland students are striking, because that was supposed to be one of the safest districts in the country. That’s where Gavin Newsom went to speak to tell us opening schools was safe.

“Thank you, especially to the kids. Thank you for speaking up for your educators when the districts and everyone else isn’t willing to. I’m sorry that we can’t do more for you, but I hope you can stay safe and keep fighting.”

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