Students in Washington D.C. protest in-person classes amid record levels of infection

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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) encourages high school youth to contact us today to share the conditions in your school. Get involved in the fight against unsafe school reopenings!

Students throughout the Washington D.C. public schools system staged walkouts or wore red in opposition to the unsafe return to in-person classes on Tuesday. The protests are part of a wave of walkouts and strikes by students and faculty in opposition to the return to classes following the holidays.

In the past month, student walkouts have occurred throughout the United States and internationally. In addition to Washington D.C., last week over 1,000 students in neighboring Montgomery County Public Schools, one of the country's largest systems, walked out to protest reopening. The day before, students were forced to back down from protesting in Broward County, Florida after their school board threatened punishment. Broward County, the sixth largest school system in the country, has seen over 7,000 COVID-19 cases a day in recent weeks.

On Tuesday, a walkout at Benjamin Banneker High School in Northwest D.C. drew several dozen students, while smaller gatherings were reported at McKinley Technology High School, School Without Walls, Phelps High School, Dunbar High School, Woodrow Wilson High School and Ronald Brown Preparatory High School.

The protests were organized by Students 4 Safe Learning, an online student group formed barely a week before. "We aren't just kids talking to talk. We know that we have to advocate for ourselves and families. There's so much stress that comes with not knowing if you're bringing something home to your family and friends. It all takes a toll on our mental health," says the group's mission statement on Twitter.

Students at Benjamin Banneker posted videos featuring signs and posters, with a number of students stating that they intentionally went a day long without eating due to fear of having to remove their masks. "I don't think we should be here. I caught COVID-19 myself. At least two to three people in every class I have are out," stated a student at Woodrow Wilson High School to an International Youth and Students for Social Equality reporting team. Another student said, "it doesn't make sense" that classes are open now even though the caseloads are the highest of the entire pandemic.

"No one wants to be here. Everyone's getting COVID," said Alexander, a student at Woodrow Wilson High School. "It's unfair for everyone. Wilson is a very populated school; everyone is close to each other. It's unfair for students, families and teachers." When asked why schools were being kept open despite unprecedented COVID-19 outbreaks, Alexander stated he thought it was "all about money."

Students connected the US government's lack of interest in dealing with COVID-19 with its increasingly belligerent stance against other countries on the world stage. David, a student from Wilson, denounced the Biden administration, stating, "the thing that pisses me off is that they are sending people to other countries. … The US spends billions of dollars on the military and can't solve the problems it has here."

Following the walkouts, Students 4 Safe Learning hosted an online webinar which drew students and activists from around the city. Students reported that schools are marking them absent when they test positive or feel sick and choose to stay home to protect themselves and others. For students who contract COVID-19, "their attendance is not excused and their

health or reasoning for staying home is not considered," the speakers explained.

Contrary to the claims that in-person learning is vital even during a pandemic, students in the District's more impoverished schools are being forced into inhuman conditions without protection from the coronavirus in order to free up their parents to report to their jobs and produce profits.

On Friday, teachers from Anacostia High School walked out in protest after bullets struck the school building in southeast D.C. "As a staff, we came together today and said, 'Well, that's enough. We've had enough,'" stated world history instructor Brandi Byrd to NBC-Washington. "Teachers overwhelmed by violence and COVID-19 chose not to teach at one Southeast D.C. school on Friday and instead spent the day urging administrators to address their concerns," the publication stated.

In the period leading up to the Christmas holiday and New Year, Washington D.C. posted some of the highest cases of COVID-19 in the country. "The D.C. region went into Christmas weekend with record-setting coronavirus case rates—and came out with even worse," wrote the *Washington Post* last month after Christmas. In the week after the holidays, Washington D.C. was reporting upwards of 9,000 cases daily, the worst it has seen during the pandemic.

The weekly average for COVID-19 cases was at 1,100 in the week ending January 18. The city has seen nearly 1,300 deaths since the pandemic began. According to *Axios*, Washington D.C. reported 580 COVID-19 hospitalizations on January 4, an all-time pandemic high.

Across the country, 1.15 million minors caught COVID-19 in the past week, according to the most recent update provided by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Nearly half of all pediatric cases in the United States have occurred since schools reopened for in-person classes last fall.

While the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) system was forced to temporarily shift its classes online in the days prior to the winter break, city officials refused to let the record-setting outbreaks slow the reopening in the New Year.

"It makes [Washington D.C. Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser] look good to say that schools are open," stated Alexander, the student from Woodrow Wilson High School. Last week, the city's Democratic Party-led council passed legislation requiring schools to increase reporting the number of COVID-19 cases to families.

According to the *Washington Post*, the bill "backed down from an initial proposal to require schools to establish specific numerical thresholds for operating virtually instead of in-person when plagued by a high number of coronavirus cases."

Last week, Bowser also announced plans to increase the rate of pay for city substitutes, as record COVID-19 cases have sidelined many of the regular teaching staff.

The Washington D.C. government has taken its lead from the Biden White House. When asked if the Biden administration had any "words of support for the students in D.C. who are currently walking out to protest lax COVID standards," White House press secretary Jen Psaki stated that the administration has been "so supportive" of public health protections, to ensure people *feel safe* in their school" (emphasis added).

In other words, the Biden White House has led the charge to chloroform public opposition to actual unsafe learning conditions by reducing public health standards and designing ways to avoid the toll of the pandemic from being reported accurately.

A member of the IYSSE, speaking to a group of students at an online webinar, denounced both Democrats and Republicans, stating, "the pandemic spreading out of control is the result of deliberate decisions that were taken by the entire political establishment to subordinate all of society to the interests of the capitalist class." The speaker called on students to join the IYSSE and direct their struggle against "the cause of all of humanity's ills: the capitalist system."

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