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California universities and colleges force reopenings at the peak of the winter Omicron surge

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Temporary closures of California’s university and college campuses are ending as COVID-19 cases continue to rise as a result of the Omicron variant. In unison, the higher institutions throughout the state that host some 1.8 million students are reopening starting Monday, January 31. This comes despite the fact that nearly 4,000 people are dying across the US daily, the seven-day average of new cases in the state is 105,000 and ICU beds in many regions are pushing towards 90 percent capacity with hospitals buckling under the sheer volume of COVID patients.

California is a hub of higher education, with two of the largest public university systems in the US. The University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems host 280,000 and 485,000 students respectively, while the California Community Colleges is the largest institution of higher learning in the country, with 2.1 million students.

Throughout the pandemic, colleges and K-12 public schools have been shown to be major hubs of mass transmission of the virus. Mass outbreaks on college campuses throughout the US in mid-December forced a number of colleges and universities to close, transfer classes online and commit to starting the spring semester remotely as a result of student outcry. However, the recent, temporary closures of the campuses are themselves an admission to the dangers of the spread of the highly infectious Omicron variant, which has spread like wildfire even among the highly-vaccinated and boosted populations on college campuses.

The policies of these institutions set an example for countless other colleges and public-school districts. They are therefore prime targets for reopening, as their continued closure gives credence to the growth of opposition by college students and faculty as well as K-12 teachers, students and families pushing for remote learning. In the effort to keep public schools open in the face of growing opposition, University campuses are being forced to reopen to bolster the illusion of safety.

Los Angeles has the second largest college student population in the country, just behind New York, at 950,000. K-12 schools in the county are reporting absentee rates averaging over one in four

students, and the seven-day average of new cases is a whopping 30,000 people in Los Angeles county as of Thursday. Despite these facts, the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), a school of nearly 45,000 students, intends to reopen Monday. With UCLA leading the charge, nearly a million college students will soon be forced back into unsafe university environments.

Responding to the surge in cases, over 2,000 UCLA students, faculty and alumni have undersigned a statement addressed to the University from the Disabled Student Union, demanding a remote learning option and calling for a mass sick out and demonstration Monday.

Also in opposition to unsafe conditions, faculty at Pasadena City College, a primarily working class college with a student body of over 25,000, held a demonstration against holding classes in-person after reopening on January 24. This demonstration was significant in that faculty made appeals to students to join the struggle against reopening. In the face of the opposition of nearly 80 percent of faculty, the college coldly responded that “The timing of the return to campus is not open for negotiation.”

The situation is nearly identical across the state. Further south, the major San Diego County universities continue with their reopening plans in the middle of the current surge. At the University of California San Diego (UCSD), which has a student population of 39,000, there have been over 3000 student cases since the start of the term on January 3 of this year. UCSD leadership boasted it would be “ending its ghost town appearance,” a bitter statement given the rising daily death toll predicted to surpass last winter.

Responding to concerns, the administration of UCSD has given professors the choice to hold class in-person or remain online. For professors that hold their classes in-person, there is no efficient system of accommodations for students who have to quarantine. According to users on the UCSD subreddit social media platform, accommodations are only made upon proof of COVID-positive status. This effectively creates an incentive for students to come to class sick, or go untested, as missed days may be penalized before

COVID test results come back.

Although many professors have committed to remaining online, this places the pressure and onus on the individual faculty members. Students are expressing concern at these policies, with one warning on social media that, “in 3-4 weeks we’re gonna see that this was a really bad idea.”

At San Diego State University (SDSU), which has a student population of 36,000, classes will reopen to in-person instruction on February 7. SDSU is relying on a combination of booster mandates and biweekly testing for students who do not have the booster. These weak mitigation measures have already been exposed as inadequate when facing the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

In Northern California, Bay Area colleges are also in the middle of reopening. Stanford reopened for in-person instruction on January 24, and the University of California, Berkeley plans on reopening Monday. Stanford’s reopening comes despite the infection of nearly 700 students and faculty just two weeks ago. The Bay Area has seen a surge in cases in the tens of thousands; Alameda County and Santa Clara County both saw over 50,000 cases in the last two weeks.

Alice, a researcher at Stanford, whose name has been altered to protect her identity, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about her experiences dealing with the unsafe conditions on campus.

“First of all, this is a matter of life and death,” she said. “Transmission is happening in schools no matter how much politicians are trying to deny that.”

She said it was “so frustrating” to deal with the “exceptionalist attitude” of the university. “To see Stanford saying, ‘We really want to welcome our freshmen back,’ we are ignoring the global pandemic to make sure that the Stanford product is something we can sell.”

“It’s completely in line with the pattern you see everywhere, Stanford putting the profit motive above all else.” She explained, “This is happening on a national level; the administration is completely ignoring science, epidemiology, virology, etc.”

She noted that in the first week after winter break, there were over 1,000 infections on the Stanford campus.

She said a difference between college campuses and K-12 is that it is less about getting parents back to work and more about the profits of the university. They want to “have kids physically at Stanford paying for their dorms, paying for their dining halls, paying for their tuition, so they don’t question whether this private elite education is worth it, whether it would be better to be at home on my PC at a community college.”

Alice expressed concern, in particular, about professors she knew who were older or who had vulnerable people in their family and also said she was “moved and heartened to see so many people go on strike,” in reference to the wave of teacher and student struggles against school reopening.

Alice said, “In the current political system [it has been decided] that we need to sacrifice millions of people. What we’re seeing now is completely unacceptable,” she said.

According to a report by the SFExaminer citing the California Hospital Association (CHA), hospitals expect the current surge to continue for another four to six weeks. The CHA further warned

that the peak of the surge will triple COVID hospitalizations. This is compounded by severe staff shortages and low ICU capacity, which is between 80 to 91 percent full in all six of California’s regions. Particularly troubling is the 9.3 percent availability of beds in the San Joaquin Valley.

Currently, the seven-day average of cases in California remains over 100,000 per day. In an admission of the severity of the crisis, California’s Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has been compelled to reinstate the state’s sick pay. Deaths, the most lagging indicator of the severity of a surge, are still expected to peak in the coming weeks.

This finds a stark contrast with the tone of the media towards the current state of the crisis. A recent article in the Hollywood publication *Deadline* celebrates that the Omicron variant “not only develops faster than previous strains, it also cycles through the infected host more quickly.” For all the jubilation that “the peak has passed” and celebrations of drops in cases, the author is still forced to admit that there were nearly 20,000 new COVID cases in Los Angeles alone that day, and “the number of Covid-infected people dying will continue to increase for the next several weeks.”

Claims by the entire political establishment and corporate media that the virus is endemic and the population must “learn to live with the virus” does not mean that COVID will become less severe, it means that the ruling class will do nothing to contain the spread of the virus and is working to normalize thousands of daily deaths. The more the virus is allowed to spread throughout the population, the more likely the virus will develop further mutations that make it more transmissible and vaccine-resistant.

There is only one takeaway from this danger: The working class must take up the struggle to protect their lives and health and organize opposition to policies of mass infection and death. This struggle must be based on a scientific perspective and must be bound up with a struggle against the capitalist system. We call on students, teachers, parents, and workers to join an online meeting this Sunday, January 30 of the West Coast Educators’ Rank-and-File Committees to organize a fight to halt the deadly reopenings. Sign up here to join Sunday’s meeting and to learn more.



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