Democratic governors in Oregon, Washington and California set to end statewide mask requirements

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Last week, Democratic governors on the US West Coast announced an end to indoor mask requirements that have been in place since March 2020. While deploying the false argument that COVID-19 is now "endemic" and not a serious threat, politicians and public health officials across the region are claiming that as cases and hospitalizations temporarily recede, masks should come off, even as the United States approaches an official death toll of 1 million.

Oregon officials announced that the statewide mask mandate will be lifted on or before March 31, whenever hospitalizations fall bellow 400 total across the state, down from the Omicron peak of 1,130.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, an epidemiologist and health officer for the state of Oregon, was quoted in the *Willamette* pointing to a near future without public health restrictions, stating, "The evidence from Oregon and around the country is clear: Masks save lives by slowing the spread of COVID-19. We should see COVID-19 hospitalizations drop by the end of March because so many Oregonians are wearing masks and taking other steps to protect themselves and each other, such as getting a booster shot or vaccinating their children. At that point, it will be safer to lift mask requirements." By his own logic, Sidelinger admits that the removal of masks will fuel the spread of SARS-CoV-2, leading to a future rise in infections and thus new variants.

Washington Governor Jay Inslee ended the outdoor mask requirements as of February 18 and promised an end to indoor mask requirements by March 21. Local governments and school districts are already making plans to "phase out" mitigation measures like masks, with King County in the Seattle region ending the full vaccination requirements currently in place for bars, restaurants and gyms on March 1.

At a press conference last week, Inslee rationalized ending mask mandates by insisting that lifting the mask mandate will somehow be rational when COVID-19 hospital occupancy reaches 5 patients per 100,000 Washingtonians. "We have done a rigorous assessment," Inslee argued, "At that level of hospital admissions, the hospitals will be able to have relatively normal functions at that level of admissions." This was contradicted the very next day when Washington State Health Association CEO Cassie Sauer begged Washingtonians to continue wearing masks indoors. Speaking to local news, Sauer pleaded that "we need the public's help to prevent a COVID resurgence."

Speaking at a press conference last week, the Washington state schools Superintendent Chris Reykdal claimed that, "as part of the transition from pandemic to endemic, I believe that it is safe and timely to eliminate the statewide masking requirement for students and allow for a decision by local health officials." Reykdal continued, "I recommend the Governor and Department of Health change the guidance to reflect this in the coming weeks."

The strategy being adopted by Democratic Party politicians across the United States is best articulated by California Governor Gavin Newsom's "SMARTER" plan released last Thursday. The plan calls for the end to basic public health measures that slow viral transmission like the use of daily case metrics, contact tracing and quarantining and mandatory masking. Speaking for the corporations and financial interests he represents, Newsom proclaimed that society must move on from "crisis mentality" regardless of the pandemic reality, adding that "this pandemic won't have a defined end. There's no finish line."

While a specific date for the end to required masking in schools has yet to be released, California has already dropped indoor mask policies for those who are fully vaccinated, even though vaccination status is not something that will be checked or enforced in the population. In California, case numbers overall have decreased. However, the daily average is around 20,000 cases and 200 deaths, which is a vast undercount. In the past week, 1,470 total deaths were reported, which is 12.6 percent more than two weeks ago.

The universal end to basic mitigation measures implemented by West Coast politicians and the Democratic Party will result in a sharp increase in cases, hospitalizations and deaths this year as variants and subvariants of COVID-19, such as BA.2, continue to spread. In the spring and summer of 2021, prematurely ending mitigation measures led to a major resurgence of the pandemic, driven by the emergence of new variants. Likewise, the current abandonment of all mitigation measures will leave the population—particularly the elderly and immunocompromised—vulnerable and unprepared for another surge of the pandemic.

The recent decisions in California, Washington and Oregon follow a similar end to mitigation measures in Democratic-led states across the East Coast, as well as other nations, with the

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liberal political establishment now openly embracing the "herd immunity" strategy of the far right. Contrary to their empty statements, their policies are not based in the scientific knowledge of epidemiology and public health.

As scientists have explained to the *World Socialist Web Site*, "endemic" has different meanings, none of which describe the nature of COVID-19. An endemic virus, like malaria and the common cold, is one that is localized to a given region or sees a stable and predictable level of cases in a population over time. Endemic does not mean that it is not a serious threat to human life or that nothing should be done to stop it.

Purposely ignoring the science, political leaders are using the term "endemic" to justify a return to "normal," giving the green light to resume full economic capacity with absolutely no restrictions on the profit-making capabilities of the ruling class. This is accompanied with the abandonment of data tracking, allowing the United States to give the appearance of a less severe COVID-19 situation simply because cases, hospitalizations and deaths will not be closely reported.

Lifting of mask mandates will only serve to further mass infection and death. Immunologist Dr. Kristian Andersen stated on February 14 that for at least the next 10 years "we should probably expect that most people will get infected a couple of times a year, and we should expect 200 to 250 thousand deaths or so in this country alone." Furthermore, every time the virus spreads from one person to another, mutations in the genetic structure of the virus can occur. Mass infection without any hindrance creates the perfect conditions for the uncontrolled emergence of new variants, increasing the chances for complete vaccine evasion.

After experiencing the horrors of the last two years, filled with extraordinary loss of life and hardships for working class and young people, the end of pandemic mitigation measures is deeply unpopular. Polls have repeatedly shown that the majority of Americans are in favor of mitigation measures which would save lives. A recent YouGov poll showed that 58 percent of Americans are in favor of "protecting Americans from the health effects of the coronavirus outbreak" over protecting "the economy."

Maya, a parent in Portland Public Schools district, expressed her concerns on Facebook about the ending of mask requirements in Oregon and how that will impact schools. "My biggest concern is that Portland Public Schools will drop the mask mandate. Each time we've eased up on safety mitigations, we have a surge in cases," she wrote. "I don't understand why we pull the mitigations that are clearly working. It will lead to new bargaining with the teachers' union, as their contracts include mask-wearing, and this will be Portland Public Schools putting anti-mask parents against teachers AGAIN."

As schools reopened in the new year children have been infected at record levels. According to the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP), confirmed COVID-19 cases among children spiked dramatically in 2022 during the Omicron variant surge with almost 4.2 million child cases reported since the beginning of January. To date there have been 1,334 children who have died of COVID-19 and these numbers continue to rise. Pierce County, the second largest county in Washington, saw its first pediatric death from COVID-19 on January 30 when a 10-year-old girl lost her life.

The mass infection of children and youth will have serious long-term health consequences that are still not entirely understood, but these long-term consequences include Long COVID and the long list of debilitating symptoms that go along with it. Some children who have had COVID-19 may later develop multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), a rare but serious condition. Additionally, children and teens ages 18 years and younger who have had COVID-19 are up to 2.5 times more likely to be newly diagnosed with diabetes 30 days or more after infection.

What lies behind the calls to end mask mandates is the drive to normalize mass infection and death without end. Preventing the spread of COVID-19 by enforcing mitigation measures threatens profits and the rise of the stock market. Both Republicans and Democrats are on board with mass infection. One of the main policies in protecting the economy is keeping schools open. Democratic governors on the West Coast, with full support from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union, have been driving this policy since last fall, before children 5–11 years old were even eligible for vaccination.

It is well known that the pandemic can be ended in a matter of months through the implementation of rational policies, the shutdown of non-essential production with full financial support for those affected, mass testing, robust contact tracing, isolation of infected individuals and the use of KN95 or more effective masks. China has successfully pursued a Zero COVID policy and most of that country is living life as normal as a consequence. The death toll in the US is rapidly approaching 1 million, while China has suffered less than 5,000.

The homicidal policies of the ruling elite around the world that have lead to at least 423 million infections and 5.8 million official deaths so far can be stopped, and the pandemic can be ended. However, this alternative requires the active building of a political movement of the working class, in opposition to both capitalist parties and trade unions, and unified on an international basis. Workers in every industry, including manufacturing, logistics, education and health care, must take up the fight to form independent rank-and-file committees to coordinate this struggle.

We urge all teachers, nurses and other workers interested in sharing your thoughts about the pandemic, exposing conditions at your workplace and getting involved with the rank-and-file committees to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* .

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