

Florida governor Ron DeSantis berates high school students for wearing masks

Alex Johnson
3 March 2022

In a video that has gone viral on social media, Florida governor Ron DeSantis was seen Wednesday viciously berating a line-up of high school students for wearing masks during a press conference held at the University of South Florida.

As he walked on to the podium to speak, the far-right Republican denounced the seven children behind him for having their masks on as the broadcast was starting. Presenting himself as an absolute opponent of face coverings, which slow the spread of COVID-19, DeSantis pointed at them and shouted: "You do not have to wear those masks." He continued: "I mean, please take them off. Honestly, it's not doing anything and we've gotta stop with this COVID theater. So, if you want to wear it, fine, but this is ridiculous." Three of the students took their masks off in the face of the governor's intimidating and bullying provocation.

The attack triggered condemnation over the Governor's bellicose stance against the teenagers. One of the fathers of the children in the video, Kevin Brown Sr. told WFLA news: "I would tell (the governor) to stop bullying kids." Dawn Marshall, another parent, told the news channel: "It's just shocking that the governor told these kids take off your mask," she said. "He pretty much said take off your mask, it's stupid, and take off your mask your parents don't matter."

Marshall's son Eric, a senior, revealed he felt compelled to remove his mask after DeSantis' frightening remarks. A reporter asked: "Did you feel pressed by the governor to do that?" to which Eric replied: "A little," and said, "It was more of pressure of an adult figure asking me to do something and it's just like alright."

The incident on Wednesday comes just days after DeSantis gave the opening speech at the Republican Party's Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) in Orlando, an event that provided a snapshot of the fascistic transformation of the Republican Party with former President Donald Trump as its leading figure. The governor, who is emerging as a serious contender in the 2024 presidential race against Trump, made an appeal to the corporate and financial elite entirely along fascistic lines based off his reactionary record of opposing lockdowns, forcing the reopening of schools and banning any and all mandates on masks on campuses and other public spaces during the pandemic.

Championing the so-called "free state of Florida," he gloated over preventing his state from descending into "some type of Faucián dystopia" and rejecting "the bio-medical security state." He declared, "We kept our schools open five days a week. We

stood strong." Florida has the third highest number of cases and deaths, with nearly 6 million cases and over 70,200 deaths from COVID-19, primarily a result of DeSantis' homicidal policies.

In a statement to local media following the press conference, the governor's office reaffirmed the blistering message made during the press conference. Press secretary Christina Pushaw declared after the video went viral that there was "no evidence that masks make any difference."

Pushaw continued: "That has been clear for a long time, and the data informed our state's official guidance. Following Florida, the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] has even stopped recommending mask wearing for most Americans. After two years of mixed messages from health authorities and the media, the governor wants to make sure everyone is aware of the facts and data now, so they can feel free and comfortable without a mask."

In reality, the "facts and data," which were handed down by the CDC in its updated guidelines in late February and that are now being regurgitated endlessly by the corporate media and politicians, are devoid of scientific credibility. CDC officials now assert that people can wear masks based on the capacity of their county's hospitals, rather than on the level of community transmission of COVID-19. As a result, almost 70 percent of Americans spectacularly shifted from living in an area of "High" to "Low" or "Medium" coronavirus threat due to the change in metrics.

The guidelines brush aside entirely the science which shows that the aerosolized virus can hang in the air for hours, and makes clear the necessity of wearing N95 or better masks or elastomeric respirators to prevent people from exhaling or inhaling SARS-CoV-2. If combined with the temporary closure of nonessential workplaces and schools, with full compensation for workers and small business owners, mass testing, contact tracing, improved ventilation, and other necessary public health measures throughout the globe, COVID-19 could be eliminated in a matter of months.

Eliminating mask requirements in in-door spaces and discouraging their use is not based in science or public health but is rather a politically-driven decision that embraces the "herd immunity" strategy of allowing mass infection of the population. This homicidal policy was pioneered by the Trump administration but is now being carried out under President Joe Biden through false claims that COVID-19 has become "endemic."

DeSantis' attack on the students comes at a time where the

entire political establishment and the CDC are waging an aggressive campaign to eliminate public face covering requirements and all other remaining mitigation measures that impinge on corporate profit-making.

State after state has followed suit in abandoning indoor mask policies and mandates, while both Democratic and Republican state governments are justifying such policies based on the CDC's unscientific guidelines which amount to declaring a pandemic that continues to rage all but over, and as the official number of Americans who have died from the preventable disease approaches 1 million.

According to the CDC's own data tracker, the US has seen over 210 deaths among children this past month with approximately 8 dying each day on average. Almost 70 percent of these, 148, occurred in the last 13 days, a rate of over 11 per day. Finally, 84 were added across the five days from February 23-27, a rate of nearly 17 per day. These statistics disprove the notion that the virus has become "mild," a false claim which has been peddled with increasing frequency the past several months despite the rapid spread of COVID-19 driven by the Omicron surge. The rates of pediatric infections and deaths are at the highest they have ever been throughout the pandemic and cases are exploding.

In the face of massive outrage over his attack on the students, DeSantis has doubled down. On Thursday, a video was posted on his personal Twitter account celebrating his bullying tactics and the entire record of the Florida governor's approach to the pandemic in the state, which was one of the first in 2020 that began rolling back restrictions.

The video begins with the clip of the governor barking at the students over their face coverings before proceeding to a frivolous presentation mocking Democratic Party officials and liberal celebrities for their own hypocritical abandonment of public masking. It then displays a cartoonish curtain that closes with the words: "End The Covid Theater," a reiteration of the scornful remarks he made at the press conference.

The clip ends with a video of DeSantis delivering a speech lauding the state government's efforts early in the pandemic to lift lockdowns, open up all non-essential businesses and schools, and gradually eliminate all systematic contact tracing and testing. "When the weight of the world was coming down bearing down on our shoulders...freedom has prevailed in the sunshine state," DeSantis blares.

In July of last year, DeSantis signed an executive order effectively banning school districts from establishing mask mandates in response to rising COVID-19 cases and the enormous risks posed to younger people, particularly those that are immunocompromised. A lawsuit in a Miami federal court in September of last year was filed by a group of parents of disabled children in order to block DeSantis' efforts to prevent school districts from requiring students to wear masks during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Later in October, DeSantis directed the Florida State Board of Education to dock salaries from school boards and other district officials from eight counties, regions where the virus had been spreading uncontrollably, as punishment for defying the governor's ban on mask mandates in classrooms.

The state Education Board approved plans to deduct amounts equal to a month's pay from school board members and reduce overall funding to the counties if they received federal grants intended to offset the state's fines. All eight counties, including the largest containing major cities like Miami and Orlando, eventually ended their mask mandates in schools once students returned in January from winter break, despite case positivity rates and child hospitalizations soaring in the face of the Omicron surge.

Democratic Party officials in these counties greenlighted the removal of mitigation measures in schools at a time when DeSantis became more fervent in his demand that all restrictions be effectively removed, and the spread of the virus be normalized. During a State of the State speech delivered in early January, DeSantis declared: "Florida has become the escape hatch for those chafing under authoritarian, arbitrary and seemingly never-ending mandates and restrictions." He said mitigation measures were: "grounded more in blind adherence to Fauci declarations than they are in the constitutional traditions."

The governor's fascistic rant also included promises to halt undocumented immigrants from entering Florida, a proclamation he was to repeat in his speech at the CPAC conference on Saturday where denounced Biden for "dumping illegal aliens into Florida." DeSantis pledged in his State of the State speech to create a law enforcement office dedicated solely to attacking voter rights under the guise of combating "election fraud." He also demanded the banning of teaching critical race theory in schools, falsely equating racialist politics with socialism, and the adoption of reactionary anti-abortion legislation.

The right-wing assault launched by DeSantis along with the murderous policies enacted by the Biden administration are confirmation that outside of a struggle waged by workers and youth for scientific-based public health policies, nothing will be done to end the sacrificing of millions of lives for the sake of the profit-driven capitalist system.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact