

Seattle students walk out in protest over dropping of mask requirements

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On Monday, over 100 students from Franklin, Chief Sealth International, Roosevelt, Lincoln, Nova, and Center high schools staged a walkout to protest against the decision by the district to lift its requirement for students and staff to wear masks. The Seattle Student Union, which had just recently been formed, sent a letter to Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Superintendent Brent Jones demanding that mask rules be reinstated and informing him that students would take action if stronger safety protocols were not set in place.

Students have been demanding more protections from COVID-19 since January, staging a rally at district headquarters, the John Stanford Center, to urge Superintendent Jones to reconsider the policy change. Nova High School senior Eridon Stewart told the *Seattle Times*, “Every time we try to get hasty and toss our masks off, we have another spike and another thousand people die.” Stewart and her mother have asthma and are immunocompromised, adding to their risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19.

The student walkout is part of a broader movement of workers and youth internationally. It began the same day 600 oil workers in Richmond, California, struck Chevron demanding better wages and more protections against the pandemic. More than 70,000 transportation workers in India have been striking for 20 weeks for similar reasons, defying back-to-work orders and threats of government repression.

Franklin High School sophomore Marigold Wong also told the *Seattle Times*, “It’s absolutely maddening we have to take time away from our education to fight for safety and health.”

Aderyn Kee, a Roosevelt High School sophomore, said she has lost three family members to COVID-19 and that wearing masks could prevent more from dying.

Luna Crone-Barón's father is a cancer survivor, and

said now that masks are not required, she and her younger brother are risking his life every day due to his being immunocompromised. She explained to the *Seattle Times*, “It is not fair that I have a teacher who is immunocompromised and has to take care of her elderly grandmother and now she has to be scared every single day coming into the building to teach us and nurture us and do what she loves. That is injustice.”

Luciana Lovik, a Lincoln High School sophomore, told King 5 news, “It’s really important to recognize the immunocompromised and other people so we kind of dropped everything because this was really big news.”

In a statement on behalf of SPS on Monday, Assistant Superintendent of Public Affairs Bev Redmond said that the district lifted its mask requirement in alignment with guidance from the Washington State Department of Health and Public Health. Redmond added that SPS “supports student voice” on the issue of health and safety. However, SPS will still mark as unexcused absences any student who misses class due to the walkout.

The Seattle Education Association (SEA), which has sponsored rallies by educators against the dropping of COVID-19 mitigations issued a statement saying, “We watched as students in our classrooms grappled with the implications of this change on their lives and the lives of their families and friends who are immunocompromised or unvaccinated. Students were not given any voice in this change or how it would be implemented.” SEA union officials said that the district had promised to bargain over mask requirements, claiming that the district violated a memorandum of understanding when the mask mandate ended without their involvement.

Such statements are at best crocodile tears. The SEA,

along with its parent National Education Association and partner union the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have played a leading role in ensuring the success of US President Joe Biden's homicidal back-to-school campaign through successive surges of the pandemic. Just two weeks ago, AFT President Randi Weingarten visited striking teachers at three separate Chicago-area districts and refused to unite the struggles, instead keeping them isolated and increasingly worn down.

Last week, the SPS reported 67 new COVID-19 cases, all of whom were students. Although the district says that cases had been cut in half since late February, students are seeing fewer of their classmates wearing masks and are concerned about the Omicron BA.2 variant that is spreading globally, which could cause another spike in cases in the US after the latest lull.

To date, King County as a whole has suffered at least 2,658 deaths from the pandemic, more than 21 percent of all deaths in Washington state.

The danger of the death toll spiraling even higher is very acute. Scientific studies of the BA.2 sub-variant of Omicron suggest that it is both more transmissible and more lethal than the Omicron BA.1 subvariant that preceded it. BA.2 is quickly becoming the dominant strain of COVID-19, and these findings directly contradict what governments around the world are saying about Omicron being mild.

One particular study at the University of Tokyo compared BA.1 and BA.2 and determined that BA.2 has so many mutation differences that it should be assigned its own Greek letter as a full-fledged variant. This study concluded that BA.2 is the most dangerous variant yet in the 27 months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The slew of studies highlighting the danger of BA.2 are either ignored or downplayed by the media and the ruling elite. The continuing claim is that Omicron is "mild" and that it is perfectly fine for all public health measures to be dropped and students forced back into pandemic infected classrooms. Any mention of the death toll of the Omicron wave, about 200,000 since it began, is taboo.

The struggle by the Seattle students is a microcosm of the social conditions faced by workers and youth the world over. It must be unified with existing walkouts and strikes against the homicidal pandemic policies of

the Biden administration, expanded to every section of the working class, and must be informed with a political perspective against both the pandemic and the underlying cause, capitalism.



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