

Peru imposes mandatory school attendance as COVID risks rise

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Throughout the pandemic, COVID-19 in Peru has claimed more lives per capita than in any other country in the world. Only recently was its death rate surpassed by Bolivia.

Figures announced on March 23 by Peru's Health Ministry, Minsa, indicate that since the beginning of the pandemic there have been 3,542,602 positive cases and 211,944 deaths.

Between March 14 and Monday, March 28, all Peruvian public schools have reopened. By March 28 more than 8 million students already had returned to classrooms (75 percent public and 25 percent private).

Peru's Ministry of Education (Minedu) announced that the reopening is mandatory for all students: "With the new regulation we are working on, the principles of voluntariness and gradualness will no longer apply; therefore, it will be a massive and mandatory return for all."

To support the back-to-school push, Peru's bourgeois media has cited statistics from the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Research Center as of March 22 that COVID deaths over a seven-day average were 39, a significant drop from this year's peak of 135 on January 22, which was mostly due to the BA.1 Omicron subvariant. This is compared to the worst trimester of the Delta strain, which saw an average of over 700 deaths per month in February-April 2021.

Such figures only provide an illusion that the coronavirus crisis is abating. A deeper look shows the current danger from COVID-19 remains high, particularly at schools.

First, although Minsa announced some minor steps to protect students from contracting COVID-19, they have been effectively eroded by the Ministry of Transport and Communications (MTC) permitting 100 percent occupancy in school buses, and 100 percent class

occupancy if a one-meter distance is somehow able to be implemented. Confining students together in close proximity creates a ready transmission belt for spread of the virus, even with masking.

Second, recent figures indicate severe failures in Minsa's strategy to fight the pandemic, particularly on the vaccination front.

La República recently characterized the fight against the pandemic as "directionless," specifically referring to "gross errors" in the government's vaccination program.

According to Minsa, out of a population of 32.9 million inhabitants, 25,188,282 have been fully vaccinated. The number of doses administered is claimed to be 64,576,385.

Minsa had asserted that vaccination numbers are not going down. But data analyst Juan Carbajal told *La República* he has calculated that since the current Minister of Health Hernán Condori took office on February 8, "the vaccination rate has dropped by 54 percent at the national level," and that the decrease since February includes the first, second and third doses.

Carbajal added that while pediatric vaccinations had begun on January 24, "such is the drop that we are at the level of the first days and we have yet to give 46 percent of children their first dose."

The Ombudsman's Office offered another piece of information pointing to the precariousness of Minsa's program: there are 15 million Peruvians who have not had a third dose, another indication that vaccinations are in decline.

Condori initially stated that further vaccinations were on schedule, but recently admitted that 2 million vaccines will expire on March 31 before they are administered. The health minister then tried to wash his

hands of the matter, stating that throughout the pandemic there have been “expiring vaccines,” and that his predecessors had received the COVID-19 vaccines with two-month expiration dates.

The Comptroller General of the Republic has confirmed that 2,449,000 Astra-Zeneca doses expire March 31, and that an additional 2.6 million will expire April 30.

Third, Peru’s National Health Institute detected cases corresponding to the subvariant Omicron BA.2 beginning in the first half of February. Full opening of schools is especially irresponsible given evidence of its health dangers and its rapid spread in other countries.

As CNN recently reported, “the BA.2 strain is on the rise in the United States and already accounts for one-third of COVID-19 infections.” Moreover, “it can cause more serious disease and appears capable of thwarting some of the key weapons we have against COVID-19 new research suggests ... and like Omicron, it appears to largely escape immunity created by vaccines.”

The BA.2 Omicron subvariant is already sweeping Europe and Asia. A massive increase in COVID-19 in Austria has been reported since January, after protective measures were ended, largely due to BA.2. France, Germany and the UK likewise have seen COVID surges due to Omicron BA.2. And the BA.2 subvariant is fueling a new COVID surge in Australia.

Minsa, Minedu and Peru’s bourgeois press appear to be oblivious to all of the above risks. The Peruvian ruling class is “all in” with the strategy of “learning to live with the virus” and “let it rip.”

According to the World Bank, Peru already lags other countries in the region in education spending as a percentage of GDP at 3.9 percent, well behind Brazil (6.2 percent), Argentina (5.5 percent), Chile (5.4 percent), Ecuador (5 percent), and Colombia (4.5 percent).

Also, according to UNESCO, with data adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), Peru invests \$3,471 per student, less than most South American countries: Chile \$8,933, Argentina \$7,752, Brazil \$6,674, Uruguay \$6,192, and Colombia \$4,807.

The health of Peru’s students, like education spending, has now become an entirely secondary concern, subordinate to profit interests.

Behind the reopening of schools and relaxing sanitary measures is the Peruvian bourgeoisie’s desperate need to revive the economy by any and all means, as the country faces its greatest economic and political crisis in recent times.

The only serious attempt to organize teachers, students and the working class as a whole to fight and defeat the pandemic has been initiated by the World Socialist Web Site—the website of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The WSWS launched an inquest into the COVID pandemic, its biological basis and spread, its economic and political causes, while fighting for the only viable strategy to end it. For a Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic.



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