

San Francisco Bay Area becomes California's COVID-19 hotspot after serving as model for pandemic response

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Recent reports from health officials in California have indicated that the state is experiencing a sixth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic with an exceptionally high positivity rate in the San Francisco Bay Area. The state's health department revealed that, as of May 28, the top three counties include Contra Costa, with 12.3 percent, and Marin and Solano, both with 10.9 percent. Experts warn that gatherings associated with the Memorial Day weekend will exacerbate the situation, leading to further infections and hospitalizations.

According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the San Francisco Bay Area reported a COVID-19 incidence of 54 per 100,000 residents on May 20, an 80 percent increase from the previous week's 30, while hospitalizations nearly doubled over the last month to a total of 1,708.

This significant upsurge has emerged as part of the pandemic's sixth wave under conditions in which, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported on May 20, the United States' seven-day moving average daily case rate increased by 18.8 percent relative to the previous week, along with the 24.2 percent rise in hospitalizations, both largely driven by the highly infectious and immune-evading BA.2 and BA.2.12.1 Omicron subvariants.

The official numbers put out by the CDC, however, are likely an underestimate of the infection rate, as they fail to account for asymptomatic infections or sick individuals who do not get tested. Dr. Bob Wachter, chair of medicine at University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), recently told the *New York Times* that as many as one in 20 people are asymptomatic but infectious with COVID-19.

Recent data has pointed out that even infected

individuals who feel fine can later suffer from long-term complications caused by COVID.

Rather than stimulating calls for the immediate closure of schools and nonessential workplaces or even the reinstatement of mask mandates—necessary measures that effectively curtail transmission—state and local officials have largely responded to this latest surge with feckless recommendations for indoor masking, in line with the Biden administration's adamant opposition to any collective strategy to eliminate SARS-CoV-2 in favor of forcing individuals to learn to “live with the virus” that has already killed at least one million Americans.

Almost two weeks ago, parroting Biden's rhetoric, California's Chief Epidemiologist and Deputy Director of the Center for Infectious Diseases Dr. Erica Pan intimated that residents ought to resign themselves to “learning how to live with this virus,” despite that it “continues to throw curveballs” and could develop into variants capable of evading “our immunity to an extent that we really have a much larger impact on our infrastructure.” Pan further dismissed even limited measures such as broad mask requirements and stated that a mask mandate would be considered only if there is an “increase in deaths that is really unusual severely.”

In response to last week's discovery in local wastewater of the BA.4 and BA.5 Omicron subvariants—which are even more transmissible than BA.2 and BA.2.12.1—Santa Clara County Deputy Health Officer Dr. George Han threw his hands up, stating that the continual introduction of “more and more subvariants” into his jurisdiction “is to be expected.”

Amid rampant spread of COVID-19 in the county, San Jose mayor Sam Liccardo has admitted to becoming infected with the virus. On May 23 Liccardo tweeted that he is “thankful that my vaccination has prevented any serious symptoms” and encouraged “everyone to get vaccinated, mask up indoors, and utilize free covid tests.” This was not followed by any endorsement of future lockdowns or even mask mandates, measures that would have prevented his own infection.

San Jose, which has a population of just under 2 million, is the largest city by population in the Bay Area and the tenth largest city in the US.

Despite walkouts of students in the Bay Area last January to demand adequate masking and outdoor seating, in May spokespeople for the San Francisco Unified School District and Oakland Unified School District rejected any changes to their mask-optional policies.

On May 19, the *Chronicle* reached out to several public school officials in the region, including spokespeople for the San Francisco and Oakland school districts, who “uniformly” rejected any changes to their mask-optional policies. Representing the former, Laura Dudnick, seeking to assuage students’ and parents’ concerns, said that the district is “following public health guidance and strongly encouraging vaccines and.. masking.” Most Bay Area school districts are taking their lead.

Exemplifying the bankruptcy of this policy, in early April about 90 out of 600 attendees at San Mateo High School’s prom event, held at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, tested positive for COVID. As the *Mercury News* reported, though students “were strongly recommended” to wear masks, many “chose not to.”

While many officials openly downplay the mounting threat of the current surge, some schools have been forced to implement stricter—though still limited—measures to appease their constituents.

Berkeley Unified School District reinstated its mask mandates last Monday, which were lifted following Governor Gavin Newsom’s mid-March ending of the statewide mandate, for the remaining two weeks of the school year. According to the district’s public information officer Trish McDermott, this decision was made at the recommendation of a city public health

officer in the face of rising infections, often involving “at least three or more. .. occurring in the classroom, sometimes as many as five or six.”

As early as late April, the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system, which serves 50 stations throughout the region, began requiring riders to mask up until at least mid July. To encourage compliance, BART police is providing masks to unmasked riders and imposing \$75 citations on those who violate the mandate.

Regional health experts largely concur on the causes of the upsurge. UCSF infectious disease specialists Dr. George Rutherford and Dr. Peter Chin-Hong point to BA.2 and BA.2.12.1, which are 30-50 percent and 25 percent more transmissible than the parent Omicron virus, respectively. Further factors, notes Dr. Wachter, include the region’s high proportion both of residents who have been able to work remotely during the pandemic and—due to loosened restrictions—suddenly been exposed to the virus, and of those who have never become infected.

The evidence is a damning indictment of the response to the pandemic by both Democratic and Republican officials at the federal, state, and local levels, who march in lockstep with each other imposing the same unscientific, expressly anti-working-class policies in the interests of the financial elites. The purpose of these policies is not to protect the broad masses of American workers but, on the contrary, to ensure the unimpeded generation of profits from their labor, whatever the cost in lives and livelihoods.

To defend its own interests against the ruling class’ rapacious policy of mass death, it is vital for workers in California to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions and the Democratic Party, in workplaces and schools throughout the state. We urge all who agree with this perspective to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today and help build and expand the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees.



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