“I’m ready to put my body on the line to save our children”

On eve of school reopenings, Hawaii teacher calls for fight against state’s elimination of COVID measures

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1 August 2022

Hawaii Democratic Governor David Ige and the Hawaii State Department of Health (HDOH) have issued new COVID-19 guidelines for K-12 schools which essentially do away with all mitigation measures to contain the pandemic, in keeping with the Biden administration’s abandonment of whatever remains of COVID restrictions.

While the new guidance embraces the “let it rip” approach to the pandemic that is being implemented throughout the country and the world, the HDOH has gone through the motions of attempting to provide a scientific veneer for the issuance of the new guidelines.

This consists of lies, obfuscations and the cherry-picking of old studies which were debunked as soon as the peer review process started. Specifically, the new guidance cites flawed studies done in the fall of 2020 that claimed that schools were not a source of community transmission.

Even if one were to accept these studies as good coin—and no one should—the HDOH states that these studies “have shown that transmission rates within school settings are typically lower than or similar to community transmission levels when multiple layered prevention strategies are in place.”

The HDOH then goes on to state that its new guidance for COVID-19 is “intentionally layered, flexible, and aligned with CDC’s Operational Guidance for K-12 Schools.”

What this means in actuality is that the HDOH’s new COVID-19 guidelines are nothing of the sort. They essentially do away with even the pretense of mitigation measures, instead simply making the claim that keeping up to date on one’s vaccines or having had the virus before is enough to ensure immunity.

The summary of the new guidance consists of the following:

• Individual case investigation, close contact identification, and quarantine of in-school exposures are not recommended for routine in-school exposures.

• Indoor masking should be strongly encouraged when COVID-19 community levels are at medium or high.

• Schools should provide masks to students who do not have masks at school but want to use them.

• Universal indoor masking or targeted indoor masking (e.g., in a class or grade level) is strongly recommended in specific situations (e.g., high absenteeism, cluster of cases, outbreak).

In summary: No quarantining, no masking and students come back to the classroom five days after testing positive as long they do not have a fever. Included in the snake oil the HDOH is peddling is the absurd claim that asymptomatic people do not transmit the disease. It should be noted that on the day the guidelines were announced, the daily average of cases stood at 573, with a seven-day test positivity rate average standing at 15.7 percent.

The new guidance was issued two weeks before schools were set to reopen, leaving many teachers and parents scrambling for answers to what is going on as well as ways to coordinate a response to the unsafe conditions they will be forced to endure.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to one teacher who was so angry with the new guidance, that she has been attempting to organize a walkout by teachers and students. Michelle Lindsay Lewis is a teacher at Pahoa High and Intermediate School on the Big Island of Hawaii. She is originally from Michigan and has been working as a teacher in Hawaii for three years after stints as an adjunct professor at a number of colleges and universities in Indiana.

84.7 percent of students receive free or reduced lunches

There is one school district in the state, the Hawaii Department of Education or Hawaii Public Schools, which covers 184,760 students in 294 K-12 schools on the six main populated islands. Pahoa High and Intermediate is part of the rural Kau-Keaau-Pahoa complex area, one of the poorest in the state. The percentage of Pahoa High and Intermediate School students on free and reduced lunch assistance, or Title 1, is 84.7 percent**,** significantly higher than the state average of 46.9 percent.

Pahoa High and Intermediate has 671 students in grades 7-12, more than half of whom are Native Hawaiian or other Pacific

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Islander. According to Civilbeat.org, the population in this complex area faces "food insecurity, housing instability and inadequate infrastructure, including unreliable transportation and internet access that serve as barriers to learning.

"In the Kau-Keaau-Pahoa district there are only four psychologists available, a ratio of about one for every 1,400 students, far below the ratio recommended by the National Association of School Psychologists of one per 500 students."

The WSWS asked Michelle what she thought of the new COVID-19 guidance, and she said that she was highly upset with the new guidelines. She continued, "The governor didn't announce it until two weeks before school started so that we couldn't mobilize. There's no time, but I have to try, morally."

Michelle and other teachers complained to the Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA) and did not hear back.

After getting no response, Michelle said: "We have no support from the union. I emailed our union rep [about the elimination of COVID protections and measures], I got a letter back from her and she basically said, unfortunately, since the school year has not started yet, we cannot file a grievance at this time. The contract violation must have occurred before any agreements can be filed. She told me to talk to the principal and ask if I can make indoor masking in just my classroom. That's not going to fly."

In reference to the section of the guidelines on schools providing masks for students, Michelle made the point: "Last year when we were running out of masks to give the students, the principal said, 'Well, they should have their own.' And so, the teachers had to buy the masks. Because what are you going to do? You have to have them. Last year, Hawaii still had everything. We had masks, we had social distancing three feet apart, but at least it was something; and close contact quarantines.

"Now the school semester is about to start. We go back next week, and the kids come back August 3. The governor decreed that we will have no masks, no social distancing and no quarantining whatsoever. I mean, all the COVID protections are just completely gone! No protection whatsoever!

"So I'm furious. The science is crystal clear here. One in five adults gets Long COVID. People are focusing on COVID deaths going down. You're right, but now Long COVID is up, and that means micro blood clots and brain damage for some people for the rest of their lives.

"If we have 50 million school kids going back to school without masks, with no COVID safety precautions, 25.24 percent of those kids that get infected with COVID will get Long COVID. And many will suffer brain damage and micro blood clots.

"This is morally wrong. These are children! I cannot believe that we are willing to sacrifice these children on the altar of money. It's vile!"

"Power doesn't give power back"

The lack of action by the HSTA infuriated Michelle. She said, "And that's the other thing. Our union said we have to have like a supermajority of support to file a grievance. What's the point of the union? I pay $100 a month to these people, $100 a month of my good, hard-earned money, and they can't protect me in any way? They can't protect children in any way?"

When the WSWS reporter asked her what she thought about the WSWS call for rank-and-file committees, Michelle said: "I think that's amazing! I think you know if anything is going to happen, power doesn't give power back. So, you know, it's got to be a grassroots thing. We're the 99 percent, and we need to take the power back from the 1 percent. It's something that I don't think is too radical at this point. I am an advocate for walkouts, for disrupting the system, for disrupting supply lines, disrupting the system. The 1 percent shouldn't be comfortable while we are not, and we're paying for it.

"Growing up in Michigan, we moved around a lot, and we lived in Westland, Dearborn, Dearborn Heights and Trenton. You know, I watched my mom walk the picket line. She used to work at the Livonia Chevy plant. I watched GM try to bring scabs across, and there were fights. They got bloody. I watched my mom put her body on the line for that.

"And now these unions are like, 'Send letters, talk to your principal.' No, I'm ready to put my body on the line to save our children. And I can't fathom that other people are not."

Michelle made the connection that workers' and students' problems were not going to be solved by either of the two parties of big business. She stated, "The government is sanctioning death and suffering that we're paying for. I just can't get over it. We're paying for it. And it doesn't matter whether it's Democrat or Republican. They're both corrupt.

"The wealth inequality right now across the world is greater than at any other point in history. Revolutions have happened way before this level of wealth inequality. You know, they don't represent us. They don't care. Mitch McConnell the other day said something like we're all still living off the fat of those stimulus checks. The $3,000 you sent us a year ago? They have no clue. They don't even live in the same world that we do."

She also expressed her support for the campaign of the WSWS against the attacks on Dr. David Berger in Australia who is being threatened with deregistration by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency over his social media condemnations of the government's "let it rip" coronavirus policies. She said, "I can't believe they censured him over science. I mean, these are provable facts. These are published, peer-reviewed scholarly scientific studies that no one in power is listening to. It's insane because they serve big business."

As Michelle said, "It's time for something else. ... The unions are just worthless."

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