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Shut down schools and businesses to stop the spread of new COVID-19 strains!

More than 3,000 people died in the United States each day from the coronavirus this month, amounting to 93,000 human lives. Internationally, the figure stands at 386,000 dead in January, an average daily rate of 12,800 and climbing.

This mass death will likely accelerate in the coming days and weeks. On Friday, Johnson & Johnson published a study confirming what many have feared as the coronavirus pandemic continues to rage out of control—that mutations of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that cause the disease COVID-19 have the potential to undermine the efficacy of vaccines.



A person is taken on a stretcher into the United Memorial Medical Center in Houston, Texas after going through testing for COVID-19 [Credit: AP Photo/David J. Phillip]

Scientists have warned for months that the more the coronavirus spreads, the more it changes. And the more it changes, the greater the possibility that it evolves as less susceptible to vaccines and thus more dangerous. The new strain from South Africa confirms this warning: Johnson & Johnson's single dose vaccine was only 57 percent effective at preventing moderate and severe cases of the disease in South Africa, as compared to being 72 percent effective in the United States.

Similar data was presented on Thursday by Novavax, which reported that its vaccine is 90 percent effective in the United Kingdom and only 49 percent effective in South Africa.

The findings make all the more urgent far-reaching measures to contain the pandemic. Mass vaccination campaigns must be combined with non-pharmaceutical interventions, including the full shutdown of schools and nonessential businesses.

But throughout the world, the exact opposite is taking place. California on Tuesday began allowing in-person dining and gyms to resume operations. New York City plans to reopen restaurants by mid-February. In Brazil, restaurants, bars, gyms, beauty salons, movie theaters and concert halls have been open for months. Masks are no longer mandatory in supermarkets and shopping centers in Sydney, Australia.

The spearhead of the campaign to reopen businesses and get workers back on the job is the demand to reopen schools, championed by the new Biden administration in the US.

The reopening plans are the most advanced in Chicago, under the auspices of Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot. The city is trying to fully open schools on February 1, pitching the educators of the Chicago Public Schools system directly against the state apparatus, the corporate media and the unions. The struggle of teachers and staff to oppose the resumption of in-person learning has become a focal point of the fight against unsafe reopenings across the country and internationally.

The situation in Chicago is being repeated across the country. In Alabama, Montgomery Public Schools has announced that it will not be going to all-virtual learning next week, which the administration had pledged to do in the wake of the deaths of four teachers from COVID-19. Staff at Toronto's Beverly Public School walked off the job on January 25, refusing to work in unsafe conditions.

In Germany, where there have been 20,000 deaths since the beginning of the year, schools are set to reopen February 1. In Britain, where deaths have topped 100,000, Boris Johnson's government plans to reopen schools by March 8.

These reopening campaigns have been facilitated by a massive media barrage. Every news outlet has seized on a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) scientists published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which claims, "There has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission."

Some examples of headlines include "In-person school can be safe" from *USA Today*, "CDC makes the case for schools reopening" from NPR, "CDC finds scant spread of coronavirus in schools" from the *Washington Post*, and "CDC officials say evidence indicates schools can reopen if precautions are taken," from the *New York Times*.

As under the Trump administration, the claims that schools are safe to reopen are bald-faced lies. Numerous studies published both in JAMA and elsewhere show that the school closings last March and April saved tens of thousands of lives. Peer-reviewed research in *Science* from December showed that, across 41 countries, school and university closures were among the necessary measures to reduce the number of infections in a community, and that school closures had the highest impact in mitigating the pandemic.

This mass of data forced White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain on Tuesday to backtrack on the administration's position slightly, noting that many schools do not have "the investments to keep the students safe" and thus may not reopen on schedule. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki admitted on Thursday that the CDC study was based on data from an area "more rural in Wisconsin," and that "for areas that are more populated ... there are going to need to be a lot of steps put in place in order to make the schools reopening safe."

The reality is that reopening schools during an ongoing pandemic is not safe. Even with less than 40 percent of schools doing full in-person learning, there have already been 511,000

cases reported in K-12 schools and hundreds of deaths. In some areas of the country, the daily case counts grew ten-fold after schools and universities reopened last fall.

Despite such clear and present dangers, Biden continues to champion the reopenings. He outright rejects lockdowns and claims that “there is nothing we can do” to halt the oncoming mass death. His pandemic plan mentions reopening 130 times, which is in line with his executive order from January 21 titled, “Executive Order on Supporting the Reopening and Continuing Operation of Schools and Early Childhood Education Providers.”

This is setting up the United States, and the world along with it, for another major resurgence. Dr. Michael Osterholm, a member of Biden’s COVID-19 advisory board, told CNN Thursday, “I worry the next 6-14 weeks could be the darkest weeks of the pandemic.” He has also warned that because reopenings are continuing, whatever dips there currently are in the case numbers will be overshadowed as they have been before by more devastating surges.

This cannot be allowed to happen! There is evidence that dangers raised by the South African strain are just the beginning of a whole series of new, potentially vaccine-resistant strains of the pandemic. There are already several new variants of the virus, including those that were first detected in the United Kingdom, Brazil, Nigeria and the United States, some of which have already spread to dozens of countries. While initial research into these variants has found that the vaccines are effective against these new strains of the virus, data is so far inconclusive.

At the same time, the main characteristic of the new variants is that they are generally more infectious, thus more easily overwhelming health care systems, and possibly more deadly even when hospitals are not overrun.

That more lethal strains of the virus already exist or are on the horizon raises all the more urgently the need to implement every possible measure to contain the pandemic. Schools, businesses and nonessential production must be shut down, with full compensation for those impacted. Workers must not be forced to choose between sacrificing their livelihoods and the lives of themselves and their loved ones.

Lockdowns and vaccinations must be combined with the implementation of a mass testing program to detect the virus and serious contact tracing to track down cases.

The Chicago teachers are showing the way forward. The social force that will end the pandemic is not the Biden administration, which is totally subservient to the drive for Wall Street profits, but the working class, which is fighting to save lives. The struggle of teachers in Chicago and elsewhere must be expanded to all educators and all sections of the working class in every country as part of a broader fight for the revolutionary socialist transformation of society.

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