SUNY colleges face rapid spread of COVID-19 just weeks into semester

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The first two weeks of in-person instruction at colleges across the State University of New York (SUNY) system has seen a rampant spread of COVID-19. SUNY has recorded 2,721 cases among students and staff in the six weeks between January 2 and February 14, more than a third of all cases reported for 2020. The total number of cases in SUNY has now surpassed 10,000 and three staff members have died from the virus. At least 1,237 students have contracted COVID-19 in just the two weeks since school reopened for in-person instruction.

There are two main reasons for this explosion in cases. One is that on-campus SUNY students are now required to be tested once every week. During the fall semester students were neither required to be tested before returning to campus nor while they were attending classes. With students receiving consistent tests, case numbers have inevitably gone up.

The second explanation for the rise in cases is the higher overall spread of cases in the state of New York. When colleges first returned in the fall of 2020 the average daily rate of infection in New York was around 3.5 new cases per 100,000. The average infection rate is now 13 times higher, at 45 cases per 100,000 every day.

Returning students, staff and educators to school under such circumstances is a disastrous decision bound up with the campaign of the former Trump administration, now being pursued by Joe Biden's administration, to reopen schools and the economy.

Higher education has been used throughout the pandemic as a justification for reopening K–12 schools. Public schools are in turn being used to force open the rest of the economy. All of this is done not in the interest of students, but instead in the interests of the capitalist system and its need to exploit the labor of the working class.

SUNY schools have consistently refused to close down when cases start rising quickly. Two SUNY schools this month, Geneseo and Cortland, passed the threshold to temporarily close—100 cases in a two-week period—but were allowed by the state to remain open. Both schools claimed that enough cases were from pre-return tests that their numbers did not actually pass the threshold.

In a statement published on February 12, SUNY Cortland President Erik Bitterbaum told the student body that "today's benchmark will not result in a similar forced pause. In-person classes will remain in session, and campus facilities … will remain open by following our strict health and safety guidelines."

Further on in the statement Bitterbaum exposed the unscrupulous role that the Democratic-run state government has played in keeping schools open unsafely. "Yesterday, the New York State Department of Health revised its guidelines for the Spring 2021 semester to exclude positive test results from student pre-arrival testing. For SUNY Cortland, this lowers the number of cases counted toward the 100-case threshold by 20."

The timing of this announcement is no coincidence. Both Geneseo and Cortland were on the verge of having to close down on-campus activities and revert to a two-week period of all online instruction. Last semester SUNY Oneonta was forced to close for the entire semester just 11 days into classes after 500 people became infected. If two schools were to temporarily close within the first two weeks of the spring semester, even with increased safety measures, it would be a disastrous exposure of the continued danger of reopening schools.

It is also no coincidence that this is taking place at the

same time that teachers across the country are engaged in bitter struggle with their districts and government authorities to keep schools closed and save lives.

Amidst the betrayal of the Chicago teachers by the Chicago Teachers Union and the growing unrest among teachers in Philadelphia, the capitalist system cannot afford to lose any ground. Any evidence that schools are unsafe to open must be obscured at all costs or run the risk of further igniting social unrest.

SUNY Geneseo has 118 active cases of COVID-19. Livingston County, New York, where Geneseo is located, has 189 active cases. The direction of spread is undetermined. However, considering that all Geneseo students should have tested negative prior to arriving on campus, it appears likely that the virus spread from the local community onto campus.

The simple fact of the matter is that COVID-19 is spreading at universities. Regardless of how much schools test and how well students adhere to guidelines, concentrating thousands of students into a small area has and will continue to contribute to the spread of this deadly virus.

All of these schools stand at the abyss. The United Kingdom variant, which is not only more contagious but potentially more deadly, is only a few weeks away from spreading quickly through the United States just as it did in the UK. Several other variants are also spreading around the globe, with concerns about how they may impact the effectiveness of current vaccines.

The reopening of schools while it is still unsafe must be opposed. University students and educators must link up with public school teachers and other sections of workers to build a mass movement to oppose the deadly policies of the two capitalist political parties, close schools and provide full funding for remote education until the pandemic is over.

All those who wish to join this fight should sign up to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is working to unite workers and students across the country.

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