

Maryland's Republican governor issues order dropping majority of state's COVID-19 restrictions

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Last Tuesday, Maryland's Republican Governor Larry Hogan announced the issuing of an executive order lifting most restrictions put in place a year ago in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The order, which went into effect at 5 p.m. on Friday, is the most far-reaching reversal of social distancing measures in the mid-Atlantic region, which includes Maryland, Delaware, Washington D.C. and Virginia.

The order allows restaurants, bars, retail businesses, gyms and religious establishments to operate at full capacity, and concert halls and arenas at half capacity. The order also lifted quarantine requirements for out of state travel.

The official reason given by Hogan was that the state had managed to administer 1 million vaccine doses and has a declining daily case count. When the restrictions were first put in place, there were fewer than 1,000 active cases in Maryland. Since then, nearly 400,000 people have been infected, and almost a thousand people are being infected daily.

While the number of new cases per day has declined sharply from the peak of over 3,200 in mid-January, this trend has stopped with the seven-day moving average hovering around 800 for the past three weeks. Overall, Maryland has had over 390,000 cases, and over 8,000 dead. One million vaccines represents less than a sixth of the state's population, far short of what is necessary to prevent the spread of the virus. Hogan also admitted that the available national supply of vaccines will remain flat for at least two more weeks.

The reopening order blindsided county officials who were not consulted before the decision. Montgomery County Council President Tom Hucker (Democrat-District 5) described the order as "shocking and

reckless," adding that it was "a complete slap in the face to local authority." In the fall, Hogan intervened in the populous suburban Washington D.C. district to force private and religious schools to provide in-person learning, contravening his own health adviser's rulings.

Aides for Hogan would not say who was consulted before the latest decision. According to the *Washington Post*, a physician on his reopening task force, "made up of doctors and business executives, said through a spokesman that he was not consulted on the decision." Boris Lushniak of the University of Maryland School of Health told the *Post*, "I worry about the dramatic steps taken. ... Public health, in general, is warning everybody that it's not over. The signal this gives is as if things have already turned the corner."

Business associations were similarly caught off guard. Marshall Weston, head of the state's restaurant association, told the *Post* he was "pleasantly surprised" by the order, which went beyond the measures for which businesses were lobbying the governor.

Hogan's order also revoked local-level restrictions. County leaders are still allowed by law to impose tighter restrictions, but these must be reissued, leading to intense discussions over the past week. Baltimore City's Democratic Mayor Brandon Scott announced Thursday he will keep restrictions on indoor dining and retail. Montgomery County officials voted on Friday to ease restrictions, but not go as far as Hogan's order.

Hogan's decision to reopen restaurants and other businesses comes shortly after his demand in January that school buildings reopen by March. Hogan set the deadline for Maryland schools immediately after President Joe Biden's inauguration, taking his political lead from the Democratic president's demands to have

school buildings reopened within a hundred days. Teachers and students throughout Maryland have been back in school since March 1 and have reported deplorable and unsafe conditions.

Underscoring the unscientific rationale, Hogan spokesman Michael Ricci said, “Every day in the pandemic, you’ll find some experts who are for what you’re doing, some who are against. Some will say you’re going too fast, some will say you’re going too slow.” To the contrary, a vast majority of the available scientific evidence available has reinforced that shutting down schools, restaurants, and other places where people sit in enclosed spaces has saved thousands of lives.

Experts have warned that reopening schools and now restaurants and bars will lead to an explosion of cases. It has been clear for weeks now that the decline in cases seen nationally since peaking in January is coming to an end, and that new variants will lead to a surge of cases. Just two weeks ago, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has largely tailored its guidelines to the political aims of the capitalist establishment, warned that “now is not the time to relax restrictions.”

Hogan announced his order while standing next to former CDC director Robert Redfield, who endorsed the plan. Redfield, who during his tenure in the Trump administration regularly suppressed data contradicting the president’s orders, said, “The measures that you’re putting in place today are all sensible steps to get more of the economy opened in a smart, purposeful way.” The parading of such “experts” in front of cameras to enforce a completely anti-scientific capitalist agenda demonstrates the pro-corporate character of the drive to reopen schools amid the pandemic.

Hogan has often been touted as a “sane” Republican alternative to the Trump faction of the party. It was even suggested that he might challenge Donald Trump in the 2020 primary election. Hogan’s insistence that Maryland reopen for business underscores the bipartisan consensus within the capitalist establishment for a “herd immunity” strategy to allow the virus to spread, which has already killed nearly 550,000 Americans.

This is further demonstrated by local and state officials from the Democratic Party also dropping COVID-19 restrictions. In the same article announcing

Hogan’s new executive order, the *Post* noted that Democratic state officials “have also rolled back restrictions significantly.” It cites Connecticut’s Democratic governor Ned Lamont, who “last week lifted capacity limits on restaurants and most businesses, citing a similar order in neighboring Massachusetts.”

Workers in Maryland must take matters into their own hands and unite with their class brothers and sisters throughout the United States and internationally to institute a scientific policy aimed at halting the pandemic. Workers must form their own organizations to fight back against this homicidal policy. Workers interested in joining this fight should contact us today.



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