

North Carolina Senate passes reactionary anti-masking bill

Benjamin Mateus
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The passage of the North Carolina House Bill 237, also known as the “Unmasking Mobs and Criminals” Bill, in the state Senate on Wednesday brings the state one step closer to making it illegal to wear face masks in public, regardless of the threat posed by the COVID pandemic.

The legislation was voted on by a margin of 30 to 15 along party lines, with five abstentions. Revisions to the bill will mean the state House will vote on it again. But even if North Carolina Democratic Governor Roy Cooper vetoes the law, the Republican-majority state legislature will have sufficient votes to override him.

Although the bill leaves a number of exemptions in place, it specifically deleted the exemption, “Any person wearing a mask for the purpose of ensuring the physical health or safety of the wearer or others.” Meanwhile, masks can be worn as part of “traditional holiday costumes in season,” or if the person is “Engaged in trades and employment where a mask is worn for the purpose of ensuring the physical safety of the wearer, or because of the nature of the occupation, trade or profession.”

Public mask wearing has long been illegal in the state, but with many exemptions. The exemption for public health concerns was put into effect with the onset of the COVID pandemic. The measure to remove that exemption was introduced to the Senate Judiciary Committee by right-wing Republican Senator Buck Newton.

Newton told reporters that the action was being taken in part because of recent demonstrations by students on college campuses who were protesting the genocidal Israel onslaught against Palestinians, which has completely devastated the Gaza enclave and its more than 2 million inhabitants.

Newton’s claims that students are attempting to cover

up their identities and that this represents some form of criminal enterprise are simply preposterous. “This isn’t just about protests,” Newton said. “I think it’s clear that people are seizing the opportunity to do things they’re not supposed to do, to break the law, or to intimidate people, and to keep their identities hidden, and it’s time for that to stop.”

Republican supporters of the legislation openly admit that the purpose of the measure is to help law enforcement crack down on protesters wearing masks, arguing that they were abusing pandemic practices to hide their identities.

In reality, students and protesters have, by all accounts, conducted themselves with considerable restraint. They have demonstrated exceptional courage in the face of attacks by the police and fascist thugs. Police have carried out mass arrests of young people and faculty members who have come out in support. Many also take the ongoing pandemic as a serious reason to protect themselves and others from infection.

In that, they represent an important development of conscious social awakening in response to the actions of Biden and company in shutting down all public health measures in addition to the rampant US militarism. The students oppose the government’s and respective universities’ complicity and support for these war crimes, exercising their essential democratic rights laid down in the Constitution.

In fact, the assured passage of the law will only strengthen the hand of the state and will be seen as a landmark action that will be mirrored across the country. Challenges to the North Carolina bill will assuredly reach the Supreme Court and find legal expression for state repression while potentially placing the lives and well-being of people in danger. One can even assume that those wearing respirators or who

cover their heads and faces for religious and cultural reasons will face hostility and repression from the local police and fascistic mobs.

Ohio's Attorney General Dave Yost's warnings made in a recent letter to the presidents of Ohio's 14 universities underscores the gravity of these developments.

Yost wrote, "In our society, there are few more significant career-wreckers than a felony charge. I write to you today to inform your student bodies of an [1953] Ohio law that, in the context of some behavior during the recent pro-Palestinian protests, could have that effect." That law states, "No person shall unite with two or more others to commit misdemeanor while wearing white caps, masks, or other disguise." The breaking of the "anti-disguise" carries a fourth-degree felony charge and up to \$5,000 fine and five years on community control, Yost reminded them. That the law has never been applied until now means it amounts to a state-sanctioned threat.

These anti-mask laws Yost references were enacted in the 1940s and 1950s by states in response to the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members hid their identities to perpetrate violence and terror on their victims. However, as historians have noted, these laws weren't intended to protect the victims, but were rather employed to curb the public displays of the Klan which were discrediting Democratic Party efforts to defend Jim Crow segregation. They remain in place in 18 states including North Carolina.

The COVID pandemic remains an ongoing public health concern. Despite the dismantling of all metrics that provide real-time information on the state of the pandemic, nearly 22,000 people died of COVID in the first four months of 2024. For the 2023/2024 influenza season, hospitalized COVID patients had a 35 percent higher rate of death than those admitted for the flu.

Meanwhile, the *Economist* update on the impact of Long COVID estimates a prevalence of 2 to 7 percent or upwards of half a billion people worldwide with some level of ongoing impact from their infection.

For the US, the magazine estimates a loss of \$152.6 billion in GDP in 2024 alone from COVID. For those who have left the workforce, 953.6 million hours of work were lost. Those with reduced hours account for another 366.3 million hours and those who continue to work with their condition cost more than 177 million

hours. One needs only to extrapolate these figures to the rest of the globe to understand the magnitude of the COVID pandemic atop the nearly 30 million that needlessly died because of the greed of the ruling elites that have placed profits over life every step of the way.



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