

“Back to work” campaign extends to 21 US states as working-class opposition grows

By Kevin Reed
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The drive to restart the economy in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic is moving forward across the US, as state and local officials carry out the demand of the corporations, the Wall Street banks and the White House that workers be forced back onto the job regardless of the deadly consequences.

Against the advice of public health experts and epidemiologists, and in the face of growing opposition in the working class to restarting the economy, restrictions are being lifted in 21 states by the end of this week, as both Democrats and Republicans push the false and dangerous idea that the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

In the midst of the government return-to-work campaign and growing public opposition, the US Justice Department is intervening in support of right-wing groups that are demanding an end to stay-at-home policies. Attorney General William Barr has issued an order calling social distancing policies a threat to First Amendment rights and directing US attorneys and the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division to join suits against state and local governments that continue to enforce such restrictions. The order places the full repressive power of the state on the side of right-wing, pro-Trump forces and in opposition to workers opposing the back-to-work drive.

President Trump told reporters on Thursday that coronavirus social distancing guidelines set to expire at the end of April will not be extended, as more governors take steps to lift restrictions and reopen their economies. Claiming that the social distancing recommendations are being incorporated by governors into their reopening schemes, Trump said, “They’ll be fading out, because now the governors are doing it.”

The moves by the states began last Friday, when Texas, Alaska, Colorado and Georgia began lifting limitations on personal movement and restrictions on businesses such as

retail stores, movie theaters, restaurants and hair and nail salons.

On Wednesday, the Republican governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, outlined a plan to lift the state’s previous stay-at-home order on Monday, May 4. Calling the plan to reopen Florida, “Smart. Safe. Step-by-Step,” DeSantis denounced critics who have pointed out the delay in his administration’s response to the pandemic in the first place.

DeSantis claimed the biggest obstacle facing Floridians was not COVID-19, but “fear sparked by doom and gloom and hysteria that has permeated our culture over the last six weeks.” However, while the governor was announcing his phase one return-to-work plan, which excludes Miami’s Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, where the coronavirus has been most severe, another 350 people were diagnosed and 48 more died from the virus.

On Tuesday, while DeSantis was at the White House reviewing the plan to reopen Florida with President Trump, 83 people died from COVID-19, the largest spike in daily deaths in the state since the beginning of the pandemic.

Multiple reasons have been provided by public health experts as to why the demand to reopen the economy will have deadly consequences for workers across many industries and workplaces. First, the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) continues, and job locations lack the essential equipment required by workers to protect themselves and their fellow employees.

Second, as the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert Redfield, warned in an interview with the *Washington Post* on April 22, a second wave of the coronavirus is expected in the winter, and it “will actually be even more difficult than the one we just went through.”

Although Redfield “clarified” his comment at the White

House press briefing the next day, saying he was warning that “we’re going to have two viruses circulating at the same time,” the seasonal flu and the coronavirus, the basic point remains: the coronavirus is not going away any time soon.

Third, as the pandemic continues to move through the public and infects sections of the population living in small towns and rural communities away from the cities, there are concerns that the return of business will result in a renewed surge of both cases and deaths, and medical facilities will again be overwhelmed.

For example, the Marshfield Clinic Health System serves approximately 1 million people over a 40,000-square mile mostly rural region in the northern two thirds of the state of Wisconsin. Marshfield CEO Susan Turney recently said, “We are really in a survival mode right now.” Marshfield cares for an aging population and many of its patients have chronic illnesses.

Several recent polls have shown that a substantial majority of the public is opposed to going back to work under unsafe conditions. A CBS News poll published on April 23 reported that 70 percent of respondents said that the country’s top priority should be to “try to slow the spread of coronavirus by keeping people home and social distancing, even if the economy is hurt in the short term.”

A Politico/Morning Call poll on April 24–26 of nearly 2,000 registered voters reported that 73 percent said the US should continue social distancing measures even if they further damage the economy. Only 15 percent of the voters said social distancing should be lifted even if it means a further spread of the virus.

The ruling elite is well aware of the widespread resistance in the working class to its back-to-work drive, which has been demonstrated in the form of protests, strikes and job actions across the country. Multiple reactionary initiatives have been mounted in an effort to smother and suppress this opposition.

As reported April 18 in the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Trump administration has mobilized fascistic elements within and around the Republican Party—with the backing of Fox News and the financial support of extreme right-wing billionaires—who have organized protests in state capitals demanding that stay-at-home orders be lifted on the grounds that they are “authoritarian” and a “power grab.”

These demonstrations have so far been organized in Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, Texas, Minnesota, Idaho, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania,

Indiana and Illinois. Along with President Trump’s tweets that said, “Liberate Michigan,” “Liberate Minnesota,” “Liberate Virginia,” there were protesters who displayed Nazi paraphernalia and the Confederate flag and others who carried assault rifles and refused to observe social distancing or wear protective facemasks.

The order from Attorney General William Barr issued on Monday directs the assistant attorney general for civil rights and US attorneys “to oversee and coordinate our efforts to monitor state and local policies” to ensure that measures taken by state and local governments to enforce social distancing orders do not involve “discrimination against disfavored speech and undue interference with the national economy.”

Barr’s memorandum further states, “If a state or local ordinance crosses the line from an appropriate exercise of authority to stop the spread of COVID-19 into an overbearing infringement of constitutional and statutory protections, the Department of Justice may have an obligation to address that overreach in federal court.”

The idea that William Barr is mobilizing the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department in defense of constitutional rights is preposterous. Barr has a record of defending every unconstitutional act by President Trump, such as the denial of basic rights to immigrants seeking asylum, the construction of concentration camps for immigrants along the border with Mexico, the deployment of active-duty troops to carry out policing functions at the border, and the declaration of a state of emergency to override constitutional provisions reserving the “power of the purse” to Congress in order to divert federal funds to the construction of his border wall.

The transparent purpose of Barr’s intervention is to work with right-wing groups that flaunt social distancing rules and use the prosecutorial authority of the Justice Department to force through the back-to-work measures demanded by the financial and corporate elite.

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