

As COVID-19 cases continue to climb throughout US

Hundreds of thousands of Illinois workers forced to risk health for profits under “Phase 4” of economic reopening

By Jessica Goldstein
25 June 2020

Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker announced Monday that the state would enter its fourth phase of reopening Friday after lifting several more lockdown measures that have been in place since the executive Stay-at-Home order went into effect March 21.

On Tuesday, the state reported an increase in COVID-19 positivity, to a rate of 3 percent for the tests conducted in the last week, as infection rates surge nationwide. It was 2 percent June 21.

In Phase 4 of the official “Restore Illinois” plan, the size limit of all indoor and outdoor gatherings is expanded from 10 to 50 individuals, including events such as conferences and weddings. Museums and zoos may reopen at 25 percent of normal capacity and indoor gyms, fitness centers, cinemas and theaters will be allowed to open at 50 percent capacity.

This marks the fourth and final phase according to Pritzker’s plan before the “post-pandemic” phase supposedly characterized by “vaccine, effective and widely available treatment, or the elimination of new cases over a sustained period of time through herd immunity or other factors,” according to the official “Restore Illinois” website.

In reality, the pandemic is nowhere near over anywhere on earth, and the Democratic state government’s assertions can only be seen as delusional. Phase 4 is going forward in spite of Chicago health officials’ release of statistics that reveal that there is a 5 percent chance of an active coronavirus case in a group of 10 people, with the odds increasing to 15 percent in a group of 50 people, up to 33 percent in a group of 100, and 66 percent in gatherings of 250 or more.

Other businesses and services which will open with restrictions include outdoor spectator events, indoor and outdoor sporting events, some park district programs and youth summer camps

Restaurants across the state have been open for outdoor dining since the third phase, which began May 28 for the state and May 29 for the city of Chicago, a national hotspot for the

epidemic. Though daily cases have dropped since the end of May, the state has consistently recorded between 500 and 1,000 new daily cases of COVID-19

Chicago deputy mayor for economic and neighborhood development Samir Mayekar expects a total of 200,000 more workers in the city to return to work under the next phase of the reopening plan.

Speaking at a press conference with Chicago Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot on Monday, Public Health Commissioner Dr. Allison Arwady made it clear that while the state and city are moving ahead with plans to reopen more sections of economic life, the spread of the pandemic is far from being contained.

Arwady stated that the state’s largest city was “adding around 200 cases a day, we know that people are infectious for about 10 days, generally from the time that they first acquire COVID, which means that at any given point we have around 2,000 active infections that we know about here in Chicago,” further adding that “there are many, many cases of COVID-19 in Chicago that are not diagnosed” and “many more people who have mild symptoms, or even no symptoms of COVID.”

During Phase 4, restaurants around the state, including the city of Chicago, will be allowed to open for indoor seating on Friday. Chicago restaurants will be able to seat at 25 percent of indoor capacity with tables six feet apart and restaurants across the rest of the state will open for 50 percent of indoor capacity.

The decision to move ahead with the next phase of reopening, without mass testing and contact tracing programs in place, can only be understood as a reckless action carried out by the capitalist state led by the Democratic Party.

State officials in Illinois have had ample warning of the consequences of moving into the next phase from states like Florida. Little more than one week after opening bars and restaurants in the state, at least six bars in northern and central Florida shut their doors again after patrons and workers tested positive for the virus. The state of Florida has seen a 168

percent increase in new cases over the past two weeks since it entered its current stage of reopening.

Governor Pritzker and Mayor Lightfoot have cited falling case numbers and stabilizing hospitalizations and death rates in Illinois as justification for their homicidal plans. But any suppression of the spread is due to the vast majority of workers abiding by the restrictions of the state lockdown, including the wearing of face masks in public spaces. The next stage will likely see a surge of cases in the state as these measures are further relaxed.

Studies have shown that restaurant dining is a proven vector of COVID-19. A February study approved by the Centers for Disease Control, “COVID-19 Outbreak Associated with Air Conditioning in Restaurant, Guangzhou, China, 2020” found that an asymptomatic carrier released low levels of virus into the air while eating as airflow from the restaurant’s vents carried it from right to left. The study found that approximately 50 percent of the people at the infected person’s table became sick over the following week as well as 75 percent of the people at the adjacent table.

Food service workers are particularly vulnerable and concerned for their health and safety under these conditions, even in the wake of high unemployment and lack of any financial safety net after many had been furloughed following the March executive order. The total unemployment rate in Illinois stands at roughly 15 percent and the state’s moratorium on evictions is set to expire July 31.

The state has only offered health guidelines, not regulations, related to restaurant openings, which place responsibility on the shoulders of the workers themselves. These include the recommended use of face masks by workers within six feet of others, 20 seconds of hand washing by workers every 30 minutes, and for workers to monitor their personal health daily. Patrons are not required to wear face masks while dining.

Among some of the most heavily exploited workers in the city, Chicago food service workers spoke out against being required to sacrifice their health for business interests on the local news outlet BlockClubChicago. One server said, “I don’t want to risk my health and put my body on the line so I can serve people some cocktails and steaks ... There are no safety nets for me, so what would I be risking myself for by going back?”

Another worker, who works two food service jobs to make ends meet, stated, “They haven’t offered sick pay, hazard pay, to cover our health benefits if we do get sick—nothing to make us want to work for them and feel safe doing so.”

These workers will join thousands of others across the state who have been forced to put their lives at risk for profits.

Manufacturing at plants owned by the Detroit-based automakers in the state began on May 18, 10 days before Illinois officially moved into Phase 3 of the plan. Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant on the south side of Chicago shut down just days after restarting production when positive

COVID-19 cases were found among workers at the plant. Since then, the auto corporations and the United Auto Workers have systematically concealed information about positive cases in the auto plants from workers and the public at large.

Workers in at least two Amazon warehouses in Illinois are reporting clusters of cases, with 16 at MDW2 in Joliet and 14 at MDW7 in Monee, according to data compiled independently by former Amazon worker Jana Jumpf.

A real answer to mass unemployment does not require putting hundreds of thousands of more workers’ lives at risk. For decades, the Democratic and Republican state and municipal officials in Illinois have siphoned off money for workplace safety, social safety nets and public health and education programs to put toward corporate incentives, tax breaks for the state’s millionaires and billionaires and militarizing the police.

The serious problems of mass unemployment and COVID-19 face all workers in every country. The solution must be international and socialist, joining together all workers in a struggle to expropriate the vast wealth of society from the capitalist class and place it under democratic control of the creators of that wealth, the working class.

Workers in Illinois determined to fight against the homicidal herd immunity policy of ruling class carried out by Democratic Party in the name of the capitalist elite need a political party and program to fight for their basic rights to a halt to nonessential production, full unemployment coverage and health care benefits, the highest quality personal protective equipment, and the most effective public health measures informed by science to combat the pandemic.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only such party fighting for these basic rights of the international working class. We encourage all eligible Illinois readers to sign and share the petition today to place our 2020 US presidential and vice presidential candidates Joseph Kishore and Norissa Santa Cruz on the election ballot in Illinois for the November 2020 elections.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>