

ICE threatens international students with deportation unless their college resumes in-person classes

By Sam Dalton
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Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced Monday that international students holding F-1 visas will not be allowed to remain in the country if their college fails to hold in-person classes this fall. The F-1 visa is the most popular study visa in the US. Last year, there were 1,095,299 studying in the US, the vast majority of whom reside in the country on F-1 student visas. In 2019 alone, 388,839 F-1 visas were issued.

The ICE press release states that “F-1 and M-1 students attending schools operating entirely online may not take a full course load and remain in the United States.” It went on to disclose that new visas for incoming international first-year students will not be granted and that all students currently in possession of visas who are not attending in-person classes will be denied entry at the border.

The statement goes on to note that all active students currently in the US enrolled in such programs must, “depart the country or take other measures, such as transferring to another school with in-person tuition.”

The measure was undoubtedly meant to place pressure on colleges to pursue a reckless reopening of campuses in the fall. The announcement from ICE came only hours after Trump tweeted, in all caps, “SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!”

If the measure is not reversed and colleges do not reopen in-person classes, thousands of international students will be compelled to unenroll in universities across the country. Many US colleges, whose finances have become increasingly reliant on international student tuition in recent years, are now facing a choice between a deadly reopening of campus and financial collapse. In practice, the Trump administration is

holding colleges hostage, with the release fee being the lives of students and their families.

The rule change is a reversion to a pre-existing regulation originally meant to prevent students from using cheap online classes as a method of coming to and staying in the US. However, the regulation was suspended following the shift to online learning in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. ICE has now reinstated the pre-existing regulation, in order to force international students out of the country.

The move has already sparked significant outrage among students and faculty who rightly see it as a major attack against the hundreds of thousands of international students studying in the US.

As of July 5, only sixty percent of US colleges were planning to return to in-person classes this fall. The majority of these schools are only opening these classes in a limited capacity, reserving them for freshmen only, for example.

With COVID-19 cases on the rise in 36 states and over 130,000 people now dead from the virus in the US, it is highly likely that many of the colleges planning in-person classes will be forced to re-evaluate their decision as the fall semester approaches. Those schools which choose to reopen with in-person classes will be at high risk of outbreaks on campus, forcing a mid-semester shut-down.

International students now face an incredibly difficult situation.

If their college goes online and they wish to stay within the US, these students will have to relocate to a different school at short notice, at a high cost, and in the midst of a deadly pandemic. Once they have moved, they will be forced to take in-person classes

and therefore endanger their lives for the sake of remaining in the US.

An international student at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, Abeer Mansoor described the situation to WSWS reporters: “they don’t care about international student safety and are forcing them to come to campus and die, or leave the country.”

Where colleges do experience outbreaks mid-semester and are forced to close, international students will have to leave the US, again at short notice and great expense. Furthermore, they will be forced to return home to their families following exposure to a deadly virus.

Thousands of international students are weighing what consequences might await them if they do choose to stay. If forced to leave the country mid-semester how would international students move their belongings? How would they settle ongoing rent agreements? Will they pay high tuition fees for a further period of sub-standard online education? And who will pay for the cost of repatriation? This “suggestion” by ICE that students simply change schools mid-semester is clearly a highly unrealistic course of action for any student.

Beyond the irrationality of the new rule, there is a particular cruelty to ICE’s decision to make this announcement on the same day that a number of Ivy league colleges announced their plans for the fall semester. Many students who were expecting a resumption of their undergraduate and graduate careers in the US have had their plans shattered.

Madeline, an international student at Rutgers who has stayed in the US during the pandemic, told the WSWS, “It just seems like a very useless action to take. There’s no threat or potential danger of increased risks of COVID-19 transmission as we are already here! To hear the news felt like a slap in the face knowing what many of us are contributing monetary wise and scholarly as well. The uncertainty it brings is terrible for all of us.”

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