

Detroit mayor pushes back-to-work agenda as COVID-19 cases rise across Michigan

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Detroit mayor Mike Duggan pushed forward with plans to reopen the city on Thursday as the number of deaths from COVID-19 in the city passed the 1,000 mark and the confirmed cases approached 10,000.

During his daily briefing, Duggan called on fellow Democrat, Governor Gretchen Whitmer, and the health care establishment to “move quickly to open up medical care” for city residents, insisting that “every day’s conversation is going to be more and more about what we can restart.”

Beginning on Tuesday, Duggan began outlining plans reopen Detroit by announcing that 200 city workers would be back at their jobs maintaining Detroit parks, the medians and other city properties. He said the return to work was necessary because “we are strongly on the decline side” of the pandemic.

As has been pointed to by the Trump administration as part of its national back-to-work campaign, the official per day numbers of those who have contracted or have died from the coronavirus in Detroit have fallen since what appears to have been their peak one month ago. However, infections and deaths throughout the state continue to rise at a significant rate.

Moreever, the mayor was forced to acknowledge a lag in reporting deaths because the hospitals have a backlog and, as the reports come in, the numbers are changing and moving upward each day. In any case, the fact remains that the rate of deaths in Detroit—154 per 100,000 population—is among the highest of any city in the US.

With the working class, poor and elderly population of Detroit having already demonstrated its vulnerability to rapid infection by COVID-19, the aggressive push to restart economic activity—based on extremely limited evidence that worst of the pandemic is over—is dangerous.

Ending social distancing prematurely can, as has been pointed out by public health experts, ignite a resurgence of the virus in Detroit and other cities that have become the epicenter of the pandemic since it erupted in the US in late March.

Both Duggan and Whitmer are taking their lead for the restart of the Detroit and Michigan economies from the US auto industry, which has set May 18 as the date for a restart of manufacturing in the factories, many of which are concentrated in the Detroit metro area. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Monday that Ford has burned through at least \$8 billion and GM at least \$5 billion in cash since the national lockdown began.

Although the auto manufacturers have said that they intend to provide workers with protective gear and will “try” to maintain social distancing protocols on the assembly lines, opposition to returning to work under unsafe conditions is widespread within the working class.

It should also be pointed out that the auto manufacturers did not close the factories beginning on March 20 out of their concern for the workers facing illness and possible death from COVID-19, or due to demands by the United Auto Workers union. The Detroit auto plants were closed after workers engaged in wildcat strikes and protests, walking off the job and refusing to work under unsafe and deadly conditions.

Long before Detroit fell victim to the coronavirus pandemic, it was victim to five decades of de-industrialization, cuts to social programs, education and public health. The bankruptcy of the city in 2013 was the culmination of a long-planned political conspiracy to rid Detroit of its debt and pension obligations.

The long-term impact of this sustained assault on the working-class population of Detroit has resulted in social conditions of unparalleled poverty and

destitution greater than that of any large city in the US. Detroit had 10,744 homeless, including 2,231 chronically homeless, in 2018, according to data from the Homeless Action Network of Detroit's State of Homelessness Annual Report.

The chronically homeless are people with a long-term disabling condition experiencing homelessness continuously for one year, or four times within three years. Seniors, who made up 33 percent of the chronically homeless in 2018, and those with underlying conditions have been especially vulnerable to COVID-19. According to data published by the City of Detroit Health Department, 82 percent of the 1,036 city residents who have died from the pandemic are age 60 or older and 57 percent are age 70 or older.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that those who show COVID-19 symptoms self-isolate. Yet, as city officials and homelessness experts have acknowledged, COVID-19 presents an extremely high risk of infection among the homeless population and the city at large if there is an outbreak in a shelter with shared spaces and little room to isolate if someone gets sick.

The attacks on the working class in Detroit have been the sharp edge of a social counterrevolution that has been extended over the decades to states and cities throughout the country.

Detroit has been the target of this assault—not because of its nearly 80 percent majority African American population, as claimed by the Democrats and others who are steeped in identity politics rooted in the defense of the capitalist system—but because the working class in the city has a long tradition of militancy and integrated class struggle going back to the 1930s.

The coronavirus in the state of Michigan has continued to expand in the face of Governor Whitmer's plan to lift her "stay home, stay safe" executive order on May 15. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) reported that the number of confirmed cases statewide reached 41,379 and deaths were at 3,789 as of Thursday.

Of significance is the surge of COVID-19 cases and deaths now taking place in Kent County, where the city of Grand Rapids is located. As of Thursday, the county has seen daily increases of between 85 and 200 per day since Monday. The total number of cases in Kent

County is approximately seven times greater than the other counties in the western part of the state.

The other counties in Michigan which continue to see rising numbers of confirmed coronavirus cases are Wayne (7,672), Oakland (7,267) and Macomb (5,513) counties in the Detroit metropolitan area, Genesee County (1,581), where the city of Flint is located, and Washtenaw County (1,075) where the city of Ann Arbor is located.



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