

Central Michigan University faces COVID-19 outbreak as campus opens

Luke Galvin
31 August 2020

Just a little over a week into the fall semester at Central Michigan University (CMU) in Mount Pleasant, Michigan at least 117 new COVID-19 cases have been reported, according to the Central Michigan District Health Department.

The reckless decision to force students, faculty and staff back onto the CMU campuses is part of a drive by the Trump administration, with support of Democratic politicians such as Governor Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan, placing hundreds of thousands of lives in danger as the pandemic spreads unchecked.

Isabella County, home to CMU, has upgraded its COVID-19 risk status to Red, the highest level in Michigan, and declared a Public Health Emergency. The Health Department stated that the outbreak is directly connected to students returning to the Mt. Pleasant area.

The virus has quickly spread at the school of nearly 22,000 students, with confirmed cases nearly doubling on campus between August 17 and August 24. Isabella County also saw a 350 percent increase in infections in the third week of August compared to the previous week, coinciding with the restart of classes. CMU has yet to update the infections recorded on its website, stating that it will begin updating the count daily on Tuesday, September 1.

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, CMU student activist Emily Jones described the campus environment, noting the lack of any infrastructure to deal with exposure to the virus, with only one mask and one packet of hand-sanitizer distributed to each student and no real systematic testing protocols. Campus life resumed with relatively little monitoring according to Jones, with parties occurring on campus daily and local stores and supermarkets filled with students.

While other schools like University of Notre Dame and University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill moved quickly to online courses after mass outbreaks emerged on their

campuses, CMU has thus far refused to do so. As is now common practice across the country, CMU President Robert Davies and his administration has sought to blame students for the outbreaks.

A letter signed by Tony Voisin, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs at CMU, didn't hold back on this front. He wrote "Without fail, at other institutions nationwide, large weekend parties have increased positive COVID-19 diagnoses — and in some, the shutdown of their entire campuses." He continued, "The actions of a few selfish students have ruined an entire year for thousands of their peers. The same will happen here at CMU if students continue to engage in this type of reckless, irresponsible behavior."

These comments are a deliberate attempt to shift the responsibility for the consequences of the reckless decision to reopen the university onto the students and away from the administrators and politicians who have set this situation in motion. Living in communal housing with communal bathrooms and laundry rooms, with students exposed to a virus breeding ground environment all day, it is only a matter of time before the campuses are major centers of outbreak.

The statements are also hypocritical, as Twitter posts from August 15 show CMU President Davies actively participating in a campus party.

As the WSWS reported in the case of Notre Dame, Michigan State and UNC Chapel Hill, the outbreaks at CMU and the surrounding community demonstrate that safe in-person campus life is impossible under the current conditions. The campus re-openings are and will continue to have disastrous health consequences for students, faculty, staff, and local communities. The fact of the matter is that the drive to reopen schools and campuses at every level is a central element of the campaign to reopen the economy and force workers back to work. This campaign is being spearheaded by the Trump

administration and backed by the Democratic Party.

Students at CMU responded to the decision to reopen the campus with a petition titled “Not Fired Up For Fall,” a rebuke of the administration’s return-to-campus campaign titled “Fired Up For Fall.”

In her comments to the WSWS, Emily described some of the main demands of the petition—a general closure of campus that still provides in-need students with shelter and food, a general shift of teaching to online, reduction of fees, a ban on campus safety personnel arresting or assisting in the deportation of undocumented individuals or those committing non-violent crimes (as jailing them would increase spread in jails), a guarantee that staff who need to operate in person have proper PPE and an expansion of testing infrastructure to the broader Mount Pleasant community.

Other students and community members involved in the opposition to re-open the CMU campus also spoke with the WSWS.

Francesca Farzalo, a CMU alumnus and student activist, discussed the community response to the campaign against re-opening the campus: “The petition gained traction fairly soon after we published it online, and it now has over 700 signatures from students, faculty, and community members. We had an overwhelming amount of folks signing the petition and saying that they were afraid to come back to campus for many different reasons. Namely that they were afraid to contract the virus and lose their job, their life, or expose someone close to them that is at risk.”

The WSWS also contacted Autumn Giraud, who created the “Not Fired Up For Fall” campaign. In a statement she described her worry about how the reopening would damage the health of students, faculty, and staff, especially those at risk with pre-existing conditions, as the motivator behind founding the campaign. She adds, “The folks living in Mount Pleasant, Isabella County, and of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe can’t just “choose” to avoid students and the CMU community, it is their home.”

She went on to note several concerns facing students on campus: “I worry that not only will CMU leadership’s unethical decisions cause lives to be unnecessarily lost, but will have devastating financial effects to so many in the CMU community and beyond.”

Noting the worry of a sudden closure at CMU, she wrote: “A sudden switch to all online or needing to evacuate campus and not providing proper refunds will disproportionately affect low income and black,

indigenous, and brown students. The medical costs associated with COVID-19 and long-lasting medical problems for folks who survive will disproportionately affect similar students as well as the surrounding community.”

Commenting on the general student sentiment on campus, she stated, “They’re scared to speak up and get in trouble for voicing their concerns, which I think says a lot about the environment CMU has created surrounding student activism and feedback. They’re scared of what all of this means for their health, their peers, the community, and their loved ones back home.”

Another student organizer, Amethyst Stewart, echoed other students, stating, “Central Michigan University’s newest motto is ‘We do community,’ but they exclude surrounding communities. Mount Pleasant is more than CMU. We share this space with community members and the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. With the latest declaration of Isabella County’s public health emergency, CMU boasts only ‘100 confirmed COVID cases,’ but these cases don’t include anyone outside of the CMU community.” She also pointed out the fact that only one of CMU’s board members lives even remotely close to campus, in Midland Michigan, thus far away from the crisis unfolding on the campus they’ve reopened.

CMU’s president responded to the crisis with the statement, “While any increase in cases may seem alarming, this figure represents less than one percent of our university population.” Francesca, outlining the necessity of fighting the homicidal policies, said that she found the president’s comment horrifying. “How many lives is he willing to sacrifice in the name of profit?”

All of the students and activists expressed support for educators, students and staff facing similar situations at schools at every level across the country and were interested to learn of the development of the Educator Rank and File Safety Committees in the recent period.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact