

Hundreds at University of Iowa stage sickout as COVID-19 cases skyrocket

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Today, hundreds of students and faculty at the University of Iowa are participating in a “sickout”—where instructors and students call in sick—to demonstrate against the university’s homicidal policy of continuing in-person education.

The sickout was organized over the weekend by students and faculty across the university to demand all classes be moved online and quickly drew support. Organizers for the sickout released a pledge to stop work that netted over 600 signatures in four days.

Iowa is a global epicenter of the pandemic, with Ames, home to Iowa State University, and Iowa City, home to the University of Iowa, occupying the number one and number two spots in the United States worst affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The state has a two-week moving average of 232 cases per 100,000 people. Tyson meat workers in Waterloo, Iowa, carried out a sickout in early May when more than 1,000 were sickened.

After just one week of classes at the University of Iowa, more than 1,100 students and faculty have reported cases of COVID-19. Educators from across the university have reported mass infections in their classes, as the number of new daily cases at the school—which houses more than 30,000 students—has remained in the triple digits and the university still has 25 percent of classes happening face to face. At Iowa State University the positive rate in the second week of testing was over 28 percent.

The sickout comes as the state of Iowa comes under fire for manipulating COVID-19 case counts after nurse practitioner Dana Jones, who had been tracking reported cases on her own, blew the whistle on the state’s systematic backdating of cases. The true number of cases in Iowa was discovered to be double what the state government had reported, the numbers used to

force reopening of schools, workplaces, parks and restaurants.

The university administration has responded to the sickout with hostility. University Provost Kevin Kregel emailed all university faculty condemning the action and suggested faculty are not living up to their obligations to students.

In an astonishing display of hypocrisy, Kregel wrote: “The absence of faculty compromises our students’ ability to maintain the educational progress critical to their future success.

“Accordingly, while the university acknowledges individuals’ concerns about in-person instruction, I strongly disagree with the planned manner of expressing those concerns. I respectfully remind you that as role models, you have an obligation to deliver instruction as assigned, and to provide appropriate notice of absences due to illness.”

Neither the union for contingent faculty, the Service Employees International Union “Faculty Forward” Iowa, nor the graduate student union COGS/UE have endorsed the sickout. In denying any association with the walkout, the unions underline that their main concern is not the health and safety of students and staff but maintaining their good standing with the university and their ability to collect dues.

Faculty and students have used the sickout’s Twitter and Instagram pages to expose conditions in their classes. One student posted: “My brother isolated himself for five months and didn’t see a single person besides my parents and me. He’s been to a grocery store one (1) time since March. He moved into the @uiowa dorms last week, and today he received his positive results for COVID-19.” Another student reported, “I have in-person labs I’m forced to go to without an option to get the content online.”

Students forced to attend in-person classes published photos and videos of the conditions in lecture halls and small classrooms. In a preface to one video, a student said: “This class has 49 people and 1 professor. And the university’s idea of distancing us is having everyone sit in just every other seat. They said they are suspending people for attending gatherings of more than 10 yet they put 50 of us in this classroom. I believe there is already 8 including myself who are unable to attend class now due to self-isolating for quarantining.”

Faculty members at the University of Iowa have also used the sickout’s social media campaign to expose the reality behind the university’s reopening plan. One professor said, “I teach a gen ed [general education] course. I currently have 7 students positive out of 48. My colleagues all have at least 5–6. One has 10. I’m completely disgusted that the university has stalled so long as cases rise. That they invited tens of thousands of students back into this situation.”

The sickout at the University of Iowa is the latest expression in a mass wave of social unrest in the course of 2020. The year has seen walkouts by autoworkers, mass demonstrations against police violence and now opposition from educators and students who are being forced into unsafe conditions. The pandemic is the event that immediately triggered the demonstrations, but their underlying cause is capitalism.

University officials at Iowa and around the United States are determined to continue to push President Donald Trump’s drive to reopen campuses at the expense of the lives of hundreds of thousands of students. The stage is set, at the University of Iowa and all other campuses complicit in the back-to-work drive, for a confrontation between students and educators defending their lives and the administrators who are responding to the demands of the corporations and capitalist politicians to reopen the campuses.

The University of Iowa, which rakes in millions of dollars per year on its football program, has more than ample resources to cover the expenses of moving classes to fully remote status. The protests have targeted the university president, Bruce Harreld, who came to UI after a long corporate career as an executive for billion dollar companies including Kraft Foods, Boston Market and IBM. Harreld’s salary is over \$600,000 per year.

Millionaire administrators, along with the Democrats,

Republicans and the unions, can offer no solution for students and teachers who are defending their health and lives by refusing to return to campus.

Only through an independent struggle outside of all the organizations of the ruling class can students and teachers defend their lives from the COVID-19 pandemic. Students and teachers in Iowa must follow the example of teachers in Florida and expand their sickout into an all-out strike, forming rank-and-file safety committees on their campuses and in their schools to put forward their demands for online learning and scientifically sound safety measures.



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