

Oppose unsafe school openings! Follow the science, not greed, say Detroit educators

The Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
7 September 2020

Teachers and other school workers have formed the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to mobilize educators and other workers in the city to fight against the unsafe school reopening in Michigan's largest school district. It pledges to unify teachers, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, parents and students to fight on behalf of science and the protection of life and to oppose the homicidal back-to-work policies of Republicans and Democrats. The following is the statement from the committee outlining its purpose and demands.

It is not safe to reopen Detroit schools. We, the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, are opposed to laying down the lives of educators, students and parents for profit or participating in a poorly designed, underfunded, deadly experiment that puts our community at unnecessary risk.

By the end of August, Michigan coronavirus cases topped 102,000 with more than 6,400 deaths. The Detroit metropolitan area accounted for 66 percent of these infections and 82 percent of deaths and was a national epicenter of the deadly coronavirus. A recent photographic installation on the city's premier park, Belle Isle, commemorated the 1,500 Detroiters killed in less than six months by COVID-19 in a grim memorial to this unspeakable calamity.

Nevertheless, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) is scheduled to open on Sept. 8. Aligned with the Democratic Party, Superintendent Nikolai Vitti is responding to the demands of Wall Street and the auto companies. These corporate giants are determined to get children into school, regardless of the dangers, in order to get their parents back into the unsafe factories, warehouses and other workplaces to produce profit.

The district's decision was dutifully rubber-stamped by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), agreeing to a mishmash of in-person, virtual plus in-person (hybrid), or all-virtual instruction. The deal between the DFT and DPSCD establishes a "joint labor management committee," which they claim will oversee the "safe" reopening of the schools. This is nothing but sheer deception.

Social distancing is impossible when the DPSCD-DFT plan allows for 20 students in a class. Teachers, parents and other school workers know that herding 51,000 students and more

than 4,000 school employees into dilapidated and poorly ventilated school buildings will lead to a resurgence of the virus. Temperature checks at the schools are meaningless, since infected children are more likely to be asymptomatic. In the absence of regular and universal testing, with instantaneous results, quarantining and contact tracing, the schools can only become a vector for spread of the deadly virus, which has produced so much tragedy in the city and across the US and the world.

We issue these demands:

1. We call for the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools. Schools must remain closed until the rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts—not only the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHH)—can ensure the safety of children, teachers and school employees.

2. Every student and teacher must be provided with up-to-date computer technology and internet access for virtual instruction immediately. This technology must include working webcams and microphones.

3. School ventilation systems must be renovated or replaced to comply with scientific recommendations for a safe environment.

4. When schools reopen face-to-face, we demand mandatory rapid on-site testing once a week for all faculty, students and staff. Registered nurses must be stationed at every school, authorized to oversee testing and robust contact tracing. Working alongside educators organized in the rank-and-file safety committee, they must ensure that safety protocols are fully enacted. Teachers have the collective right to refuse to work under unsafe conditions.

5. Full transparency. We demand daily reporting to the community on results and COVID-positive cases. No one can return to a school building without a negative test.

6. No loss of income for educators who choose to stay home. Teachers will not lose their position at their school if they decide to remain virtual. Teachers shall be provided unlimited COVID-19 sick leave.

7. For freedom of speech and the protection of whistleblowers to include teachers, students and staff.

8. For the unity and safety of all educators, parents, students

and workers in our community, especially the paraprofessionals. These poorly paid workers, who make as little as \$10 per hour, have been completely abandoned by the DFT and are expected to go into school buildings and create “Learning Centers” to get students online and monitor their virtual instruction as though they were at home.

9. Full income and job protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children.

10. These measures to be paid for by a surcharge on Michigan’s billionaires, with a combined net worth of about \$50 billion: Hank and Doug Meijer at \$9.5 billion, the DeVos and Van Andel families (Amway), \$12 billion; Daniel Gilbert at \$6.5 billion; Ronda Stryker and family \$11 billion (medical equipment); pizza and sports magnate Marian Ilitch at \$3.7 billion, and, of course, the multi-billion-dollar Ford family. Repeal the corporate tax abatements showered on the automakers and parts manufacturers.

The decrepit conditions of Detroit schools became an international scandal in 2015. But now they represent an immediate and deadly threat. New studies have shown that aerosolized particles can travel as far as 16 feet. Under these conditions, updated HVAC is a life-and-death necessity. But Detroit schools have been bankrupted and have no funds for HVAC retrofitting.

Also, of great concern is sanitation and access to clean water. Our schools have never had sufficient supplies or adequate cleaning under “normal” circumstances. How will “deep cleaning” occur? The district was forced to shut off drinking water at every one of the 106 school buildings because of elevated levels of lead and copper. This means children must rely on contaminated water for frequent handwashing and cleaning.

There is enormous support for a fight. Last month, Detroit educators voted by 91 percent to authorize a “safety strike” to block in-person teaching. A poll in late August showed 80 percent of parents also opposed the unsafe return to buildings. Autoworkers at the Jefferson North and Sterling Heights Assembly Plant have already set up their own safety committees because the promises by the auto bosses and the United Auto Workers union for a “safe” reopening of the plants have amounted to nothing. It is a matter of historical fact that the plants were only closed, and the partial lockdown of the economy put in place in March, because autoworkers defied the UAW and management and shut down production as the contagion ripped through the plants.

But the enormous strength of the working class can only be mobilized if educators organize independently of the DFT, which values its relationship with Duggan, Whitmer and Biden more than the lives of educators. While their rhetoric may differ, the Democrats, no less than Trump and the Republicans, are determined to force teachers back into the schools.

Superintendent Vitti and DFT President Terrence Martin have hypocritically claimed that getting Detroit children back into

the schools is a “racial justice issue.” The supposed concern over the plight of minority children never stopped the Democrats who run Detroit from slashing school funding, closing hundreds of schools and cutting vital social programs.

The Democrats, the DFT and groups like By Any Means Necessary (BAMN) claim the miserable conditions in Detroit are caused by racism because they want to protect the Democratic politicians and the corporations who are responsible. At the same time, they want to divide teachers along racial lines right at the time when millions of workers and young people, black and white, are coming together across the country and the world to oppose police killings and racism.

The terrible toll of the pandemic in our city is not caused by systemic racism. It is caused by the systemic class oppression of capitalism, a system that subordinates every aspect of life, including life itself, to corporate profit. The Detroit Rank-and-File Safety Committee rejects all the efforts to divide the working class along racial and ethnic lines and fights to unite all workers and youth to protect our lives and social rights.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed as a national network to coordinate and facilitate the building of district-wide and state-wide safety committees which are being set up in Florida, Texas and many other locations. There is growing sentiment for a national strike to halt the homicidal reopening of schools. We support this movement and wish to lend our strength to those around the country looking for mass action of the working class because our lives are at stake. We call on all layers of workers—manufacturing, logistics, food processing, health care, public and private sector—in Michigan and nationally to join this struggle.

We have formed the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to protect the lives of our students, families and the most vulnerable members of our community. We call on all educators, parents and students in Detroit who agree with these demands to join and build our rank-and-file safety committee! All those who agree with this fight should contact us today, build the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee Facebook group and make plans to attend our next online call-in meeting on Saturday, September 12.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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