

(HELD) 999 Students and staff respond to University of Iowa one-day sickout

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Last Wednesday, students and staff at the University of Iowa staged a “sickout”—in which hundreds of instructors and students called in sick—to demonstrate against the university’s homicidal policy of continuing in-person education. Over 900 instructors and students signed a pledge to call in sick in support of the protest. Despite limited organization, the sickout represented a genuine and brave stand of opposition by students and teachers against the university’s deadly reopening plans.

The sickout was publicized just four days in advance, over the anonymous Twitter and Instagram pages @uiwasickout. The sole demand was for the school to transition to 100 percent online classes.

The protests come on the heels of a massive increase in cases on the campus, as well as the state of Iowa more broadly. On Tuesday the University of Iowa released updated COVID-19 statistics, revealing that an additional 220 students and three employees had self-reported positive tests. After only two weeks of class, the total number of infections is 1,589. Similarly, at Iowa State University there have been 1,475 confirmed positive cases since August 1.

The seven-day average of new cases for the state of Iowa is now 259 per 100,000 residents, the nation’s second-highest. The Iowa Department of Public Health reported a 28.8 percent positive rate in testing for COVID-19. On Tuesday, 588 individuals tested positive, bringing the state total to over 70,000 positive cases. To date, 1,180 residents of Iowa have died from COVID-19.

There are currently 78 University of Iowa students with the virus who are self-isolating on campus; an additional 24 students are in quarantine. The University of Iowa has more than 30,000 students and 30,000 employees, meaning tens of thousands of workers and students are at risk of contracting the deadly respiratory virus. Johnson County, Iowa, where the university is located, reported Monday a 14-day average positivity rate of 22.8 percent.

Despite the startling growth in cases after only one week of classes and the opposition by teachers and students manifested in the sickout, the University of Iowa administration remains determined to continue holding face-to-face classes. Currently, as many as 25 percent of credit hours are still in-person.

According to the University of Iowa faculty, the

administration sent out two threatening emails last Tuesday evening in an attempt to stop the sickout. The first was to COGS, the graduate student union, reminding them of their obligation to the university to be in the classroom. The second email was to faculty.

The latter email admonished faculty and students for demonstrating against the intransigent administration and threatened faculty with reprisal. The statement claimed that teachers withholding labor over deadly workplace conditions constitutes violating contractual “obligations.”

The email, signed by the university provost, Kevin Kregel, reads: “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.” The email continued by outlining the university’s plan for a “safe” reopening, a plan, which should be noted, has led to one of the worst campus COVID-19 outbreaks in the world.

The administration has done everything in its power to ensure in-person learning and large lectures continue. The enormous response from students and faculty to the revelations of the virus outbreaks has demonstrated in no uncertain terms how they regard the administration’s homicidal policies.

Students and faculty responded with strong support for the sickout, while there was widespread feeling that a one-day sickout was inadequate to bring about the demand for 100 percent online instruction. Many of those who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* called for a broader struggle.

One instructor told our reporters: “I’m proud of the students and faculty for standing up to the blatant intimidation tactics of the university, and for calling out the administration’s hypocrisy in stating they’re continuing in-person classes. This was a one-day targeted action and it needs to be repeated in every school and workplace being forced back to work, not just as a sickout but as a general strike to protect our lives from the out-of-control virus.”

On Facebook, a parent shared the experience of a daughter who is a student and works in one of the university’s science labs: “She works in the lab prepping and ensuring safety rules

are followed. She went to work/lab today and was sent home because her lab co-worker tested positive and my child is with her a lot. They wear all the safety gear plus the cloth masks so it is doubtful my daughter got it from her. As bad as Iowa City is, I know it is just a matter of time until she gets it.”

Cole, a sophomore at University of Iowa, told the WSWS, “I did receive emails from some of the professors talking about the sickout. I think this is a good idea to bring attention to the issue. If my in-person class was that day I would not have attended.”

He continued, “My in-person class is not that large but still I feel like it’s too much of a risk, but I don’t want to fall behind so I just attend. I support what was done. They are acting like the professors and students can manage this global pandemic that has killed so many by being ‘mindful.’ If one student dies from this it’s going to blow up in their faces.”

Sarah, a senior, stated, “It is ridiculous we have about 3.5 percent of the entire student population having been tested positive since school began a week and a half ago. How is this not enough to go fully online? I keep being surprised by the way that ‘the smart guys’ in the room continue to come up with dumb policies. I think we have to do something more than just a one-day sickout.”

Kathleen, a University of Iowa graduate worker, shared through Facebook that she was only allowed to move her classes online after struggling to fill out tons of paperwork and disclosing personal health information. “My concerns are not for my personal situation,” she said. “I’m concerned for my colleagues, and graduate students having to go into classes where there really isn’t enough space and the conditions aren’t really appropriate.”

In response to the original report on the University of Iowa sickout published by the *World Socialist Web Site*, John Jepsen, the president of the Graduate Student Union COGS/UE Local 896, wrote to the WSWS alleging that our report on COGS’s refusal to endorse the sickout was a misrepresentation.

COGS had written in a letter to the university administration that “UE Local 896 COGS thanks you for informing us and our bargaining unit about an alleged plan for people to call in sick on Wednesday. We want to assure you that UE Local 896 COGS did not plan and will not sanction this event.”

Jepsen’s letter to the WSWS only underscores this position, making the case that COGS cannot endorse the sickout or else risk “the organization being immediately decertified as the bargaining representative of Graduate Workers at the University of Iowa.” Rather than excuse COGS/EU for their actions, this only clarifies the role of the union in suppressing the struggles of workers and being wholly incapable of defending their most basic rights.

Students and teachers at the University of Iowa are being forced to work in the middle of a deadly pandemic at the center of one of the worst outbreaks in the country. If COGS cannot call for a strike under these conditions, where graduate students

could very well die, then what good are they to the workers they ostensibly represent? What do graduate student workers gain by paying dues to an organization that is complicit in sending them to catch a deadly pathogen?

While COGS has issued statements calling for classes to be moved online, it stops short at any mobilization of students and workers which could actually achieve those ends. This is not for lack of will and determination among the rank-and-file graduate students, many of whom participated in the sickout.

Graduate workers will find no way forward through COGS and the trade unions to which it is affiliated. This is literally a life-and-death question. Graduate students, together with undergraduates, full-time faculty, Iowa public school teachers, and the broader working class must form rank-and-file committees to demand that in-person classes and other non-essential workplaces remain closed until a return to work has been determined by scientific evidence to be safe.

Only by a complete break with the Republicans, Democrats and trade unions can workers assert their rights and interests. Educators and students in Iowa should follow the example of teachers in Detroit, Florida, Texas and other states who have formed rank-and-file safety committees to demand schools stay closed.

Following the sickout at the University of Iowa, graduate student opposition to the reopening of campuses has already spread. Over 1,000 graduate students at the University of Michigan have gone on strike in opposition to the unsafe return for in-person learning. These struggles must be deepened and expanded to all sections of the working class, including meatpackers, auto workers, and immigrant workers in preparation for a nationwide general strike.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality call on all Iowa teachers, students, and workers to contact us and join the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact