

US universities emerge as battlegrounds as students and faculty fight back against reckless reopening plans

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Hundreds of college and university campuses throughout the US are emerging as central battlegrounds in the fight to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. In this fight, teachers, students, faculty, and staff stand on one side of the barricade, fighting for an end to the reckless policies of in-person learning, for resources to be allocated for safety measures and online learning, and for policies based on science, that put life over profit.

On the other side of this fight stands the university administrations, the corporate-controlled trade unions and both the Democrats and Republicans.

The sharpest expression of this struggle is unfolding on the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor, Michigan where nearly 2,000 graduate student instructors are in the midst of a strike against in-person learning. The strike has the backing of thousands of undergraduates, lecturers, university staff, and workers from the community. Support from other campuses facing similar situations has also started to pour in, including from Columbia University, where grad students issued an open letter Wednesday in support of the Michigan students.

Despite the brave stand taken by students and workers, the University of Michigan administration has refused to meet the grad students' demands. During a contentious general membership meeting of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) on Wednesday night, strikers voted 700 to 400 to reject the university's proposal—which ignored their demands for remote learning only—and to continue their strike. There is no doubt that the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent organization of the GEO, exerted pressure to end the strike before it became a catalyst for a broader movement against the reckless back-to-school policy, including in the public schools, where at least six teachers have died from COVID-19 over the last few weeks.

In fact, the expansion of the strike beyond the campus is exactly what is required for the struggle to be successful and lives to be saved. And there are already similar strikes brewing among students and faculty throughout the country.

The situation at the University of Michigan is far from unique. In almost every case, campuses that have reopened around the country have turned into hotspots for the virus. Students, faculty, and teachers are beginning to fight back.

California

The **University of California, San Diego** (UCSD), is working to implement its “Return to Learn” program, which includes a plan to offer 12 percent of fall 2020 courses using an in-person or hybrid modality. The 12 percent figure is deceptive; some 14,000 students will be brought back to campus under this plan.

UCSD has announced that at least 47 students, 21 campus employees and 184 healthcare employees have already tested positive for COVID-19. Despite these alarming figures, the university is planning to re-open for the fall quarter at the end of the month.

In opposition to this reckless policy nearly 600 UCSD students, faculty, and staff have signed an open letter to the university. The letter demands that administrators cancel in-person classes, limit housing to those with no other options, and cancel layoffs and furloughs.

The mounting opposition at UCSD comes as **San Diego State University** (SDSU) has announced a staggering 440 positive COVID-19 cases so far this semester, with 110 cases being added in the course of just two days. The positive cases are among students living both on and off-campus, and have increased exponentially since the surge was reported one week ago, from 64 to 440.

There are many indications of widespread hostility to SDSU's reopening policies among the students and faculty. Students have spoken out on social media, exposing the inadequate response from the administration. One student post on Reddit outlines many of the issues in great detail, and gives a sense of the sentiments of students toward the administration's policies. The student writes, “They ONLY care about taking our money, but will act under the guise of ‘caring’ about our health and safety, and do everything to avoid the easy and obvious solution because it doesn't bring in money. And where is our money actually going? Does anyone really know?” The post has been “upvoted” over 500 times.

It should also be noted that SDSU is planning to allow contact sports such as football to continue, despite the obvious health risks, while canceling other non-contact sports. The lucrative nature of college sports is one major factor driving these decisions.

New York

New York University (NYU) opened its doors at various buildings throughout New York City to over 10,000 students for in-person learning on September 2. The university is endangering the lives not only of thousands of students, faculty and staff, but also countless city residents who will inevitably come into contact with students and faculty as they go about their lives. NYU has been at the forefront of the relentless campaign to reopen colleges in the fall since mid-March. The university has launched a plan titled “NYU Returns” in order to promote the illusion that the reopening is safe. As part of the plan, NYU promised a COVID-19 tracking dashboard that has still not been launched more than a week into the reopening. It is clear that the real aim of “NYU Returns” is to absolve NYU of any responsibility for an outbreak of COVID-19 and exempt it from having to reimburse tuition by placing all the blame for infections on students, faculty and staff.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at NYU has called for mobilization of students, faculty and other workers to oppose the reckless reopening.

Columbia University began in-person classes on Tuesday. About 1,000 students are on campus, and about 13,000 are living off-campus, with 4,400 living in Columbia-owned housing and the rest in other apartments, according to President Lee Bollinger. While there has yet to emerge any organized opposition at Columbia, the Columbia grad students issued a statement of support for striking University of Michigan graduate students on Wednesday.

At **Cornell University**, Resident Assistants went on a one-day strike in opposition to unsafe reopening.

Texas

Baylor University reported the most COVID-19 cases yet for Texas schools, a total of 824, with around a five percent positivity rate. As of Thursday evening, there were 256 active cases in the Baylor University community, according to the school’s COVID-19 dashboard. Baylor, the school with the most infections, is suspending students who violate the rules and increasing off-campus university police patrols.

And the **University of Texas, Austin** reported 103 new cases between September 1 and 3 alone. The university’s confirmed cases increased by 109 on Wednesday and now totals 282 student cases after the school began adding off-campus cases to its official tally. Students at UT Austin are not routinely tested. However, college athletes are reportedly tested three times a week.

UT Austin students have also reported that not all residents in dorms with confirmed cases were made aware of the outbreaks by school officials through any medium. Instead, students found out about the cases through the school newspaper, *The Daily Texan*, which spread the word through Twitter.

Students have started a petition at UT Austin demanding that all

residents, faculty and staff working and living on campus be notified when COVID-19 cases are confirmed. At the time of writing 1,167 people had signed the petition.

Many other schools have seen outbreaks.

This week **West Virginia University** was forced to suspend in-person undergrad classes amid a spike in COVID-19 cases. West Virginia University enrolls nearly 30,000 students across all its campuses and programs. The state had a staggering 11,600 confirmed cases as of Monday. Similarly, **University of Wisconsin, Madison** was forced to temporarily move classes online after a spike in cases. However, both WVU and UW-Madison are planning to reopen campus after just a two-week break.

Despite overwhelming scientific evidence and the most recent experiences at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and Notre Dame, scores of universities are still pushing forward with reopening plans. According to the College Crisis Initiative, a research project at Davidson College in North Carolina, more than 1,000 four-year colleges and universities in the United States planned to bring students back to campus in some form this fall, with 45 planning to operate “fully in person.”

The cost of these decisions is now playing out in real time. They will result in more cases, more hospitalizations and more death if not stopped. The Socialist Equality Party and its youth and student wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, urge students, teachers and staff to link up their struggles to put an end to the sacrifice of human life for corporate profit. All those who support this initiative should join our Facebook page and **contact us today** to find out how to get involved.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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