University of Michigan grad students set to extend strike as opposition grows to the US back-to-school drive

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College and university campuses have emerged as a center of both the expanding coronavirus pandemic in the United States and opposition to the criminal and deadly policies of the ruling class.

At the University of Michigan, more than 1,000 graduate students concluded the fourth day of their strike on Friday. At a meeting late in the evening, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) announced that its steering committee was recommending the extension of the strike by another week. A formal decision will be announced over the weekend.

Among the striking students, there is overwhelming support for continuing and broadening the struggle. On Wednesday, graduate student workers voted by more than 700 to 400 to reject an initial proposal from the university administration that did not meet any of their demands. This came in the face of threats of reprisals against the students if they continued their strike.

At Wednesday's meeting, a section within the GEO leadership advocated ending the strike. While the GEO leadership presented a unified message on Friday in support of extending the strike through next week, it is unclear if those who originally advocated ending the strike on Wednesday have reversed their positions.

Since Wednesday's vote, support for the strike has exploded on the campus, throughout the community and beyond.

One Columbia University graduate instructor told the *World Socialist Web Site:* "The graduate workers at Michigan are taking remarkable action and putting themselves at great risk... They are demanding decent support from their university under extraordinary circumstances, safe working conditions for everyone, and an end to cops on campus—and they're willing to fight to make it happen."

The University of Michigan "Resstaff" (Residential Advisors and Diversity Peer Educators) have posted impassioned statements of support, and many joined the picket lines on Thursday and Friday. A letter of support from faculty, circulated on social media, has now been signed by 461 educators, up from 190 on Friday morning. Local high school students have also reached out to the grad students to seek assistance in organizing in support of the strikers. The university dining hall staff initially proposed a walkout in support of the strike on Friday, but backed down in response to threats from the university.

While the situation at the University of Michigan is the sharpest expression of this struggle, hundreds of other college and university campuses throughout the US are emerging as battlegrounds in the fight to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

A report published Friday morning by *USA Today* reveals that 19 of the 25 hottest outbreaks in the US are in communities with colleges that have reopened for in-person learning.

San Diego State University (SDSU) recently made national headlines for its brazenly negligent reopening policies, which have resulted in at least 513 known positive cases on campus. Hundreds of University of California students have signed an open letter opposing the drive to reopen UC San Diego, writing that "the university is being run as a business rather than as a community, and that financial incentives are being prioritized at the expense of community well-being."

At the University of Wisconsin in Madison, 2,230 students living on campus have been ordered to carry out a two-week quarantine, after 846 students tested

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positive for COVID-19. Illinois State University has the highest percentage of cases out of any school in Illinois, with 6.45 percent of the student population having tested positive for the virus. Students and teachers in Iowa organized a one-day strike last week.

In all of these struggles, students, faculty and staff are fighting for an end to the reckless policy of in-person learning, for resources to be allocated for safety and online learning, and for policies based on science. On the other side of this fight stand the university administrations, the major corporate-controlled trade unions and both the Democrats and Republicans.

The social interests driving policy since the onset of the pandemic have been those of Wall Street, corporate executives and the capitalist class as a whole, not the concerns of masses of people who want to save lives.

The Trump administration has spearheaded this policy. The taped interviews released by Bob Woodward this week expose the fact that the White House deliberately lied about the threat and sought to downplay the danger of the virus.

Trump, however, has had many aiders and abettors. At the University of Michigan, the Board of Regents is dominated by officials with close ties to the corporations and the political establishment, in particular, the Democratic Party. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer has led the campaign to reopen factories, including auto plants, sending workers back into dangerous conditions.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent organization of the GEO, has deliberately isolated the strike. While there has been a surge of public support for the strike across the country, AFT President and Democratic Party official Randi Weingarten has yet to even publicly acknowledge the strike's existence, let alone support it.

The criminal reopening campaign on campuses and in workplaces is part of a broader policy of the ruling class, supported by both the Democrats and Republicans, which has already led to almost 200,000 deaths. The University of Washington now estimates that the number of deaths by the end of the year could rise to above 400,000.

In a statement published Friday, Socialist Equality Party US Presidential candidate Joseph Kishore wrote: "The ruling class in the United States, along with its counterparts internationally, has effectively adopted a policy of 'herd immunity'—that is, that the virus should be allowed to spread without restraint, come what may. Businesses must resume, workers must go back to producing profit, schools must open."

The statement explains: "The issues at stake—protection against the coronavirus, economic security, opposition to militarism and police violence—cannot be resolved within the university.

"These are mass issues that require the intervention of the working class throughout the country, and indeed around the world. What is involved is a fight against an entire social and economic system, which subordinates social need to private profit and the accumulation of wealth by the rich... This is the central issue: The fight against the pandemic is a fight against capitalism and for socialism."

The SEP and its youth and student wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, urge students, teachers and staff at the University of Michigan to turn to the working class and connect their fight with that of the entire working class against the capitalist system.

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