

“A general strike is a must to stop this back-to-work and back-to-school madness”

Autoworkers support University of Michigan strikers

Our reporters
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Workers in the auto and auto parts industry have spoken out in defense of the striking University of Michigan graduate student instructors, who are beginning the second week of their walkout to demand remote-only classes and to protect themselves from the spread of COVID-19.

Wildcat strikes and job actions by autoworkers forced the shutdown of the North American auto industry in mid-March, part of an upsurge of working class struggle. The work stoppages were carried out in defiance and against the United Auto Workers (UAW), which attempted to keep the factories open despite the spread of the deadly contagion. The factories were eventually reopened in May, with great fanfare about new “safety protocols” from the UAW and figures such as Michigan’s Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer. However, these inadequate measures have been summarily abandoned as the companies have ramped up production in the pursuit of profits.

In response, workers have begun to set up rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the UAW, to expose the concealment of outbreaks and fight for the interests of workers.

“I support the graduate students on strike at U of M,” Mark, a member of the Ford Dearborn Truck Plant Rank-and-File Safety Committee, told the WWS. “They should expand the struggle. We all deserve to be treated better. Pushing us back to work and back to school is a homicidal attack. People are getting sick and dying because of it.

“For the working class, we are the only ones who hold our best interests at heart. The universities, the

auto companies and the government do not care. My union, the UAW, is on the side of the company. They are putting our health at risk for the profits of the stockholders.

“Enough is enough! It is time to take a stand. A general strike is a must to put a stop to this back to work and back to school madness.”

Ron, a member of the FCA Sterling Heights Rank-and-File Safety Committee, added, “University of Michigan is one of the bigger schools and there are a lot of people watching this. To see the grad student revolt and take a stand is incredible. They rejected the university’s proposal and showed how strong they could be. It is inspiring.

“COVID-19 effects everyone, whether you have a PhD or a high school diploma. We need solidarity and unification, across the working class. But the students can’t win this fight if it is isolated to a college campus. They are fighting the whole government. If they appealed to workers in the factories a lot would join. A lot of workers are busting their ass to pay tuition for their children. We are in the same fight: You want to be in a safe environment to get an education and we want a safe environment at work. This is a class struggle.”

Referring to the revelations that Trump deliberately misled the public over the danger from COVID-19, Ron continued, “It doesn’t shock me that Trump knew how deadly this virus was as early January. So did the Democrats. Nearly 200,000 have died because they lied.”

DL, a member of the Faurecia Gladstone Rank-and-file Safety Committee in Columbus, Indiana, said, “I

congratulate the University of Michigan strikers. The grad students, the Residential Advisers and other workers at the university and the community at large are beginning to unite, and they are standing together against the tyranny of the university that brings students and professors, graduate instructors and the rest of the staff back to the campus in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“In Mexico, the deaths from COVID-19 are rising badly. They have to go to work just like we do. Over 50 percent of the Mexican workers are living at or below poverty level, and the government is pushing them back to work. If we all stand together, that will bring down the monstrous act of forcing us back to work and back to school in the midst of this pandemic.

“The University of Michigan strike is showing the way forward. All workers will need to stand together. We need hands across the world to stop this. It’s going to take the working class of the world to do it.”

A member of the Ford Chicago Rank-and-File Safety Committee praised the grad students at U of M, saying: “I applaud them for being fearless, courageous and bold enough to put themselves in a position like that. I see it as a foundation to build on to show people of my generation and in my workplace that these younger people are thinking about their future. They are standing up for a better future and we should support them to fight for that future.”

Like the herding of workers into the auto factories, the drive to reopen schools and colleges even as the pandemic continues to rage is entirely driven by profit interests. The University of Michigan has long had close business and financial ties to General Motors and other automakers, including large donations from the GM Foundation to the College of Engineering and the Stephen M. Ross School of Business. In 2018, Ross Professor Eric Gordon praised GM’s decision to shut four plants and lay off thousands of workers, writing in *The Hill* that CEO Mary Barra “was thinking about repositioning GM for the future.”



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