

# Who is on the University of Michigan Board of Regents?

**Matthew Brennan**  
16 September 2020

The University of Michigan graduate student worker strike is now in its second week. The nearly 1,200 Graduate Employee Organization (GEO) workers have since been joined by Residential Assistance Staff student workers across campus. They are courageously opposing the dangerous back-to-school conditions amid the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the demands of the striking student workers are calls for unconditional right to work remotely, financial support and flexibility for housing and childcare, increased and transparent COVID-19 testing plans based on public health models, and a demilitarization of the campus.

The strike has received overwhelming support across the campus and from students and workers around the country. As one of the most significant strikes against the back-to-work “re-opening” policy of the ruling elites and both major political parties in the US, it embodies the growing opposition of workers, students and youth around the world.

In the university administration, however, striking student workers face a hostile force, which has rejected their demands and is now threatening the strikers with a legal injunction and potential criminal penalties.

This is not a surprise since the governing body of the University of Michigan is a nexus of powerful political, military and corporate interests. Collectively the Board of Regents and Provost have worked in and for the last three US presidential administrations and Michigan governors. They constitute a small army of Wall Street, Pentagon, financial, real estate and health insurance interests. Six of the eight Board of Regents are also members of the Democratic Party.

The following is a brief profile of the leading board members and Provost Susan Collins.

## **Regent Chair, Denise Iltch**

Iltch is a Democrat from the second richest family in Michigan, and President of Iltch Enterprises, LLC. The Iltch family owns Little Caesar Pizza Enterprises, the Detroit Red Wings, the Detroit Tigers and Olympia Entertainment, and is collectively worth at least \$6 billion.

In the lead-up to the 2013 forced bankruptcy of the city of Detroit, the Iltch family helped draw up plans to cut city jobs and pensions, and privatize city services. Both the Iltch family and billionaire Quicken Loans founder Dan Gilbert used the

forced bankruptcy to buy up huge swaths of land in the impoverished city at cut-rate prices.

The whole scenario was made possible through the anti-democratic emergency financial manager law. The Iltch family received \$260 million in state subsidies in the process in order to finance their \$450 million dollar hockey stadium in Midtown—more than the \$198 million cash deficit faced by the city of Detroit prior to the bankruptcy.

## **Regent Vice-Chairman, Jordan B. Acker**

Acker, a lawyer, is a long-serving operative of the Democratic Party. In Michigan, he was the state’s Deputy Communications Director, before moving on to Washington DC, to work for the Obama Administration. In March 2011, he was appointed as an attorney-advisor to Secretary Janet Napolitano at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Under Napolitano and Acker, the DHS created or expanded countless anti-democratic and deeply repressive initiatives and programs. These include a massive escalation of anti-immigration policies: the deportation of hundreds of thousands of immigrants, the militarization of the US-Mexico border, which has led to thousands of immigrant deaths in the Sonoran Desert, the right-wing police-immigration “Secure Communities” partnership program, the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative (SAR), and oversaw an escalation of the murderous “war on drugs” military initiatives in Mexico and Central America.

Napolitano’s Homeland Security Department also participated in the Obama administration’s militarization of the police, funneling high-grade military weaponry from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the streets of American cities.

Napolitano was rewarded for her efforts by being appointed President of University of California (UC) Board of Regents in 2013, while Acker headed back to Michigan. In April of 2020, Napolitano spearheaded an effort to break the four-month-long UC graduate student worker strike for better living conditions, threatening to fire striking students and deport immigrant students.

## **Regent Ron Weiser**

Weiser is a two-time chairman of the Michigan Republican Party, and one of the richest individuals in the state of Michigan. He is currently making headlines because he is the

owner of McKinley Properties, which manages over \$1.9 billion in assets, including more than 17,371 apartments, mainly in Michigan and Florida.

Through McKinley, Weiser has at least 18 large apartment complexes near the University of Michigan and nearby Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti. These properties are overwhelmingly populated by undergraduates, graduate students, staff, faculty and service workers at the university. Were students not to return to campus for in-person classes, it would undoubtedly result in a major reduction in McKinley's annual \$500 million revenue.

Weiser was Ambassador to Slovakia under the George W Bush administration and was selected in 2016 to lead the Republican National Committee's fundraising efforts for Donald Trump. He is one of the most prominent benefactors in the school's history, having donated over \$100 million to the University of Michigan. He has also established several research centers on campus including the Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies (WECED), which is heavily oriented to and anti-communist scholars in and around the US State Department.

#### **Regent Katherine E. White**

White is a Republican and law professor, who got her master's degree in strategic studies from the US Army War College. She served in the Departments of Commerce and Agriculture in the Bush administration and is currently on the Old National Bancorp Corporate Board of Directors.

Most tellingly, she is a Brigadier General in the US Army National Guard currently serving as the Deputy Commander of the 46th Military Police Command in Lansing. This means that should the National Guard be called out at some point by Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer to suppress popular protest against police violence or the murderous back-to-school policy, it is very possible that White will be physically directing the suppression.

#### **Regent Shauna Ryder Diggs**

Diggs is a Democrat and physician. She also has ties to the health insurance industry as chair of the board on the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation.

#### **Regents Paul Brown, Michael Behm, and Mark J. Bernstein**

Brown is a Democrat with a career largely in venture capital, currently a managing partner of eLab Ventures. He served as Vice President of Capital Markets at the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), under Democratic Governor Granholm and Republican Governor Snyder. The latter, who has since endorsed Joseph Biden, oversaw the poisoning of Flint and the criminal looting of Detroit during the 2013-14 bankruptcy.

Behm and Bernstein are both lawyers who are also in the Democratic Party.

#### **Provost Susan Collins**

Collins was previously Dean of the influential Ford School of

Public Policy, before becoming Provost of the University of Michigan in January of 2020. She has a background as an Economics professor with the Brookings Institution and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). She currently sits as a member on the Board of Directors at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

Collins sent out a patronizing campus-wide letter to the graduate student workers at the end of last week, which made clear the university has no intention of ensuring the safety of the students. Two days later UM President Mark Schlissel announced the university would pursue an injunction against the striking student workers.

These individuals represent the combined interests of Wall Street, finance capital, the Pentagon, the CIA, real estate interests, the health care industry and other profit-mad elements that are the real driving force in the murderous back to school policy.

This policy is being carried out by both major political parties in the US but has a particularly pronounced role with the Democrats on campuses like University of Michigan.

These layers are terrified that the GEO strike will continue to galvanize other students and workers, not just in Ann Arbor but around the country to oppose the reckless back-to-school policy of the Trump administration, backed by the Democratic Party. University officials are hoping the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent union of GEO, will be able to isolate and strangle the strike, and if that fails, they plan to use state repression.

To continue and expand the strike, workers and students throughout the university should establish a campus-wide strike committee to fight for the closure of campus for in-person learning, opposing reprisals and victimization by the university. But this cannot be resolved on the campus alone. The forces on the board of regents make it clear that the fight by the grad student instructors is a political struggle against the American ruling class, which can only be won by mobilizing the entire working class against the corporate and financial elite and both capitalist parties.



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