

As American Federation of Teachers shuts down UM graduate student strike

Campuses across Michigan see dramatic spike in cases

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Even as the American Federation of Teachers shut down a strike by graduate student instructors at the University of Michigan in opposition to the reopening policy of the school administration, COVID-19 outbreaks are spreading at college campuses across the state. Michigan State University (MSU), Grand Valley State University (GVSU), Central Michigan University (CMU), University of Michigan (UM), and Adrian College have all seen spikes in cases since reopening their campuses.

Ingham County, home to MSU, has strongly recommended all of its residents quarantine in their homes and mandated a quarantine for nearly 40 large student homes. Officials report that since August 24 at least 342 students and others connected with the university have tested positive for COVID-19. Only 23 positive tests were reported in the three weeks prior, just as thousands of students began returning to the area for the fall semester.

Ottawa County, home to GVSU, has likewise ordered a two-week “staying in place” order for students, citing over 600 new COVID19 cases in the student population since August 23, the week students began moving back to the campus.

CMU, which experienced an outbreak in August, now has seen as many as 271 confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Nineteen residents of South Quad dormitory at UM have tested positive, which the Washtenaw County has deemed a cluster. UM administrators have urged “enhanced social distancing” for all residents of the nine-floor dormitory, which can house over 1,000

“mostly first-year” students.

At the time of this writing, the UM COVID-19 dashboard reported 16 new cases for the week, which is fewer than the number identified in the cluster in the South Quad dormitory. This discrepancy shows the chaotic nature of the reporting at the university.

Adrian College, a small liberal arts college in southern Michigan, saw a huge spike in late August as students returned to campus. By September 8, there were 227 positive cases, which is more than 10 percent of the student body.

Almost invariably, with each new outbreak, students are denounced for their recklessness in spreading the disease. Personal accountability is emphasized by the same administrations that made the decision to open their campuses. In fact, it is these very administrations and their political allies in the two major capitalist parties and the trade unions who should be held accountable for the reckless, financially driven decision to put the health of thousands of students at risk.

The decision to open campuses is part of the wider international drive by the ruling classes to open up schools and workplaces as part of a herd immunity strategy to essentially let the COVID-19 virus transmit freely throughout the population until a large enough portion of the population has become infected and developed immunity so as to prevent further spread. This policy of “herd immunity” is unsupported by scientific evidence and expresses the needs of the financial oligarchy to continue the extraction of profits from the working class at whatever the cost to human life. In opposition to this ruthless drive for profits,

millions of workers, students, educators, and parents are determined to protect lives and health.

One expression of this was the eight-day strike of graduate student employees at UM. The strikers' demands included the universal right to work remotely without documentation and greater transparency, as well as broader issues including the presence of police on campus. On Wednesday night, the AFT shut down the graduate student strike before it could spread to lecturers, ResStaff, and other university employees.

At a meeting of the Graduate Employees' Organization where the vote to end the strike was taken, a leader of the GEO commented, "We're not going to win on pure persistence. I don't have an all-seeing eye, but what I see is exhaustion." Noting that the faculty support for the strike was toothless and nonbinding, the union leader asked rhetorically, "We have to take a look around and realize: What is the likelihood of us moving forward at this point?"

This myopic view of the graduate student employees' struggle left out the fact that the graduate student employees were leading the opposition of students, faculty, and all other employees at university and college campuses all over the state. The outbreaks at campuses across Michigan show the universality of the issues the GEO strike confronted.

Students and faculty seeking to oppose the unsafe opening of campuses must take matters in their own hands by following the lead of K-12 educators who have formed the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, as well as the autoworkers who have formed their own rank-and-file safety committees at auto plants in the Midwest.

The fight for the defense of the lives of students, educators, their families and the broader community means a political confrontation with the twin parties of Wall Street and the banks and corporate interests they defend. This struggle can only be successful if it is based on a socialist program that insists that the fight for the life and health of workers takes precedence over private profit interests.



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