

Detroit students stage sickout in opposition to the district's back-to-school plan

Genevieve Leigh
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Students in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) engaged in a virtual sickout on Thursday in opposition to the district's back-to-school plan. The virtual "sickout" meant that students did not log in to online learning for the entire day in order to call attention to their demands.

It is unclear exactly how many students participated in the action. One Detroit High School teacher, who wished to remain anonymous, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she had 9 to 12 students missing from most of her classes on Thursday. The teacher noted, "Many of my remaining students indicated that they wanted to participate, but that they were scared of reprisals."

"I think the students' strike is the first of many such actions. These students have seen firsthand the malice of the profit system and should recognize that this is not a local, or even a state issue. I think that teachers and students should unite our opposition to these policies and fight to make virtual learning as healthy and accessible as possible."

Eva Oleita, a senior at Cass Technical High School, told our reporters: "Students took part in the sickout from Cass, Marygrove, Mumford, Davison and other schools. We don't know the exact number because the school district keeps the data. A lot more kids wanted to participate, but couldn't because of their parents or worries about their grades, but they helped out anyway by sending our list of demands to the school board."

At a press conference held on Thursday morning in downtown Detroit, DPSCD students explained that students and teachers alike were burnt out from the haphazard way in which online learning was being conducted by the district. Under the current set-up, students and teachers are required to be in front of their computer screens for 8 hours at a time, with their cameras turned on. In many cases, the district is also continuing to enforce the dress code.

These striking students are demanding the district adopt a new schedule which would reduce the amount of screen time and allow for independent study. The students are also demanding funding for extensive programming to support

student mental health, removing the requirement to use cameras during online classes, and to provide extensive training to students and teachers in the proper use of a select number of apps and online programs.

While Thursday's student strike was limited to one day, the students involved are determined to continue and expand the strike if their demands are not met: "We made an impact. We went public with our demands and if the district does not implement them, we will strike again."

At the press conference, one student explained: "We are giving the district until October 2. If our demands are not met by then, we are going to strike indefinitely." The same student later explained that the strike date was based on what is called "count day." This is the day that the county officials register the number of students who are present in schools throughout the district. Schools with low absentee rates generally receive more funding.

While the demands laid out by the students are limited to immediate measures, there is no doubt that they are motivated by much broader issues.

Eva referred to the nature of the situation in Detroit public schools before COVID-19 hit the city: "We've had funding problems way before COVID. It makes no sense. The rich are making more money than ever and Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has a net worth of almost \$200 billion. His workers are not getting paid enough and they're working under inhumane conditions. I saw a video of an Amazon delivery driver just saying he was fed up and walking away from his truck with all the packages in it. It's disgusting when the rich have more money than they know what to do with, but we're told there is nothing for schools or our community."

There is no doubt that the issues animating the students involved are broadly felt among the student body, teachers, parents and workers. However, there has been a continued effort by various organizations around the Democratic Party, such as the Detroit Area Youth Uniting Michigan (DAYUM) and Black Lives Matter In All Capacities (BLMIAC), to frame the issue of the school reopenings in entirely racial terms. A press release put out by these groups

states that the aim of the opposition must be “to stop the draining and unequal online schools targeted at Black students.”

In fact, what is involved is not an attack on “Black students,” but on workers and working-class students of all races.

The mounting opposition of students in Detroit to the reckless school reopening plans is just one example of a much broader opposition building across the country and throughout the world.

Starting Monday, 276 teachers in Kenosha Unified School District (KUSD) in Wisconsin engaged in a sickout strike in opposition to increasing COVID-19 outbreaks and deadly conditions in the school district. The majority of teachers who called in sick did so on Sunday evening, forcing the district to close seven schools and switch to remote learning for this entire week.

Since the onset of the pandemic Wisconsin has had 104,170 COVID-19 cases and 1,251 deaths. In the past week alone, there have been a reported 4,200 new positive cases and 34 deaths. Just last week, Heidi Hussli, a 47-year-old Bay Port, Wisconsin, teacher died. She contracted the virus teaching in person under a hybrid model.

In South Carolina, the Facebook group “SC for Ed” is organizing a statewide sickout strike to be held today to protest unsafe conditions and low pay. There are now 622 students or staff COVID-19 cases tied to the reopening of K-12 schools in South Carolina, including 90 since last Friday alone.

In California’s Irvine Unified School District, a petition is circulating calling for a halt to plans to reopen schools. So far it has garnered over 2,000 signatures of teachers, parents and community members.

In Greece, hundreds of high school students joined by workers in a wide array of industries marched Thursday in protests explicitly against the government’s policy of “herd immunity.”

The homicidal policy of herd immunity—that is the conscious decision to allow the virus to spread without restraint—has been adopted by capitalist governments around the world. Even conservative estimates say this policy will lead to more than 23 million deaths globally in the coming years.

This policy is being driven by the need to get workers back to work in order to pump out profits for the rich.

In opposition to this reckless campaign, the Socialist Equality Party has called for the formation of a nationwide network of Educator Rank-and-File Safety Committees to organize broad-based opposition independent of the two bourgeois parties and their representatives in the trade unions.

Committees have already been formed throughout the US, including in the two largest school districts in the country, New York City and Los Angeles, California. Committees have been formed in Michigan, Texas and Florida as well as in Germany, the UK and Australia.

In direct opposition to the reckless policy of “herd immunity” of the ruling class, the demands put forward by these committees are based not on the best interests of Wall Street and the bank accounts of corporate America, but what is necessary to protect the lives and well-being of children, educators and the entire working class.

These committees demand full income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children and for the trillions of dollars which have been handed over to the rich to be redistributed to provide full funding for public education, online instruction, high-speed internet, food security, mental health care, special education support and all other resources needed to provide the best quality remote learning for every student and educator.

Educators with the Detroit Rank & File Educators Safety Committee (DRAFEC) are appealing to all students in the Detroit area to broaden their struggle and join the committee.

In statement to the WWS the DRAFEC said, “We formed the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to protect the lives of our students, families and the most vulnerable members of our community.

“We urge all those students who are looking for a way to fight back to link up their struggle with teachers, bus drivers, school staff, counselors and other sections of the working class by joining our committee.

“We urge students to reject all efforts to divide the working class along racial and ethnic lines. Instead, take up the fight to unite all workers and youth in a common struggle to protect our lives and social rights.”



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