

University of Michigan cafeteria workers oppose reopening of dining halls as coronavirus continues to spread on campus

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A month after the end of a 9-day strike of graduate student workers at the University of Michigan, the school's administration is pressing forward with plans to further reopen campus.

Since the reopening of campus, cafeteria service has been limited to take-out only. However, the school is preparing to transition to in-service dining beginning October 20. The plans were exposed to the public by student dining workers on Twitter. The Twitter account @MDiningWorkers, a student dining employee-led group, explained on Sunday that “[d]ining halls throughout campus will start allowing small amounts of in-person dining eventually working up to 400 seats.”

During the graduate student strike, nonunion MDining staff across several dining halls had planned to walk out in support of the strike. However, these actions were canceled at the last minute due to unspecified “threats of repercussion against those walking out,” according to dining workers. Campus administrators deny having made any threats, but such threats were made against the graduate students.

In the end, the GEO and its parent union the American Federation of Teachers seized upon threats of legal action by the university, as well as cynical claims that the strike was harming minority students, in order to shut down the strike, with none of the issues having been resolved. Although the strike and its central demands for remote learning and other measures to prevent the spread of the virus were met with wide support among students, faculty and staff on campus, as well as public school teachers and workers who face similar issues, the AFT/GEO did nothing to mobilize this support. Throughout the country, the AFT is in overdrive to limit the outbreak of strikes as universities

and school districts move forward with unsafe reopenings.

In the weeks following the strike, multiple COVID-19 clusters have been confirmed on campus, demonstrating the complete inadequacy of the university's testing regime. Because the school's official online COVID-19 dashboard only reports cases on a weekly basis, these are widely suspected to be an underestimate. One student recounted on social media of having to wait nearly 8 hours for testing after reporting COVID-like symptoms, only to be told by University Health Services (UHS) that she did not qualify for testing. Only upon scheduling an appointment for a separate medical issue was the student able to be seen by a doctor who agreed to administer a coronavirus test.

Dining hall workers are circulating an online petition, which already has several hundred signatures, opposing the reopening of cafeterias. The petition warns, “this is going to cause an even larger spike in [COVID-19] cases, particularly impacting our employees. I refuse to stand by while we are forced to further risk the lives of myself, my fellow coworkers, and the lives of the people we go home to.”

A student MDining worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that in-person dining would be incredibly dangerous. “The administration's plan to open campus cafeterias to sit-in dining is pretty far advanced right now. Martha Cook and the Law school quadrangle residence halls are supposed to open sit-in dining this week. Mosher-Jordan (known as MoJo) will be opening on the 20th. I've also heard about plans for East Quad dining opening up as well, but I'm not sure when.

“I wouldn't consider myself a very political person, but I believe that every human is entitled to basic

rights. I'm very passionate about that. The University of Michigan, like our country as a whole, has recently shown its true colors in its blatant disregard for the needs of working students...

"As a low-income student with a compromised immune system, this campus climate has been extremely distressing for me this semester. When you have to work to support your education, you feel really underrepresented here—it actually seems like there aren't many of us doing it. And especially in the winter, when you see a lot of wealthy students wearing their \$1000 Canada Goose jackets, you really feel the disparity."

"There aren't many students working in the dining department anymore," the student continued. "Over the years there has been a decrease anyway, and when the pandemic struck, the student employee base really took a hit. Now, it's primarily non-student staff. I love my MDining coworkers and they've been such an important part of my experience as a student on campus. This job has helped me to find my social circle at school. Being around people in a similar financial situation to me makes me feel like a bit less like an imposter here—like I have people among whom I really belong."

"So when upper level MDining management pressures us to risk our lives at work, it really makes me want to quit—but I know that I couldn't do that to my fellow employees. There are so few of us managing the workload that it would only make things harder for the lowest-level workers, many of whom aren't able to quit for financial reasons. While I'm absolutely opposed to the administration and Dining Department management, I care about the rank-and-file members of my workplace."

The reckless drive to reopen the University of Michigan's campus takes place within context of the growth of opposition worldwide by students and teachers. This week alone, struggles have erupted at multiple US universities, including Ohio's Youngstown State University and New York's Stony Brook University. Internationally, university students all over France have taken to social media to protest school reopenings. In Poland and Greece, high school students have staged sickouts and campus occupations in opposition to similar policies.

A movement to defend the right of all students and

workers to a safe education and job conditions must not be based on what politicians and corporate university regent board members deem is acceptable, but on what the working class urgently requires. The WSWS urges students and workers to build the network of rank-and-file safety committees on campuses, schools and workplaces across the country in preparation for a general strike, and the ultimate transition of political power to the working class.



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