

Alarming spike of COVID-19 infections in Michigan amid ruling class push for “herd immunity”

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COVID-19 infections spiked in Michigan this past week amid a push by sections of the state’s political establishment for the open adoption of a murderous “herd immunity” policy in response to the deadly pandemic. The total number of daily new cases in Michigan hit an all-time high Thursday with 2,458 confirmed infections, well above the previous peak of 2,118 cases diagnosed on April 3.

Schools and colleges continue to serve as vectors for the spread of COVID-19. There were 4,921 confirmed cases on college campuses throughout the state as of Monday, October 8. Outbreaks have occurred at 31 campuses.

Michigan State University (MSU), located just outside of Lansing, continues to have the most confirmed cases since the middle of the summer. The first major outbreak at the MSU campus was reported in early July. Currently, there are 1,531 cases on that campus. Grand Valley State University near the city of Grand Rapids has the second-highest number of cases with 903. Other colleges which have more than 500 cases on their campuses as of this week include the University of Michigan, Western Michigan University, and Ferris State University.

There are currently 346 active cases at 68 individual K-12 schools in Michigan. The total number of schools reporting any cases increased by 24 since the prior week. This is the largest increase in that figure since the school year began.

There is a significant upward trajectory in the overall spread of the pandemic. All five of the most populated counties in the state and several others have experienced an increase in their number of new confirmed cases of COVID-19. Rates of infection have increased by 30 percent or greater since the prior week in these counties. These include Kent County which includes Grand Rapids, Washtenaw County which includes Ann Arbor and its suburbs, and the entire metropolitan Detroit region, consisting of Wayne County and including the counties of Oakland and Macomb. Kent county leads the state with 185 new cases of the virus over the last seven days.

Despite clear indicators that the pandemic is resurgent in Michigan, there are school districts which have reopened their facilities this week after beginning the school year online. Livonia, one of the largest school districts in Wayne County, reopened for in-person learning this week. On the very same day as the reopening in Livonia, three staff members at the Metro Charter Academy high school, which is in adjacent Romulus, tested positive for the coronavirus.

The drive to herd students and educators back into classrooms is correlated with the drive to send the working class back to work, restoring a level of economic output that generates profits for the ruling class regardless of the risks to public health and safety.

For working parents to be able to resume work in factories and offices, young children in particular must be in school. Universities rake in profits from housing and other campus expenditures of students. All economically productive activities under capitalism are subordinated to the economic interests of the ruling class. At all levels of government, the imperative to ensure profits reigns over all other considerations in policy making.

Several Republican state senators in the Michigan Senate held a Zoom meeting last Saturday, where they discussed steps towards the lifting of mandates to wear masks indoors. This is a prospect that has only arrived at the Michigan legislature last week, when the state’s Supreme Court upended a series of executive orders by Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer regulating the use of indoor space by businesses and enforcing some basic safety protocols in an effort to limit the coronavirus’ spread.

On October 8, Michigan’s Senate Majority leader, Republican Mike Shirkey, spoke at a rally of far-right opponents of social and economic restrictions to slow the pandemic. After the rally, he told reporters from MLive that “nobody should be misled here, that you can keep it from spreading. It’s going to spread so we just do the best we can.” But the approach which he has advocated can be

characterized objectively as the “worst” approach that can be followed, from the standpoint of public health.

Claims which assert the futility of any efforts to prevent the spread of the pandemic are outright lies. Public health leaders have consistently endorsed closing all non-essential, in-person commerce and activities when necessary during the height of the pandemic and requiring masks and social distancing protocols. The effectiveness of these measures, combined with contact tracing and mandatory quarantining of COVID-19 patients, have been well documented and demonstrated by the experiences of countries which took such measures to initially respond to the pandemic.

On October 2, Shirkey told *Bridge Michigan* that it was time to learn “to live with the virus.” This is essentially an argument for ignoring the deaths which will continue to occur due to the spread of the virus. Currently, Michigan has confirmed 7,302 deaths from the COVID-19 disease, which amounts to a proportion of 73 people per 100,000 on average across the state.

The former head of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Thomas Frieden and four other health experts published an open letter on Monday addressed to Shirkey expressing a sharp criticism of the policies which he is advocating. The letter was also signed by Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, and Dr. Carlos Del Rio, a professor at the Emory University School of Medicine.

Dr. Anthony Ognjan, an infectious disease expert at McLaren Macomb hospital recently lent his endorsement of the homicidal policies being proposed by Shirkey and others. “Maybe what we should do is just unleash the Kraken—you know, let the kids go to school, to college. Open up everything. Stop this crazy testing—unless somebody gets sick, then test them and treat them,” he told *Bridge*. “But just let the pandemic do what it does.” A reference to a mythical and enormous man-eating monster seems ironically appropriate in an illustration of the effects that a full reopening of in-person learning will have on working class communities.

Ognjan’s view has been dismissed as unethical and deadly by the medical establishment, including the World Health Organization (WHO). In Ognjan’s own words, the strategy of “herd immunity” would see the pandemic cascade over society like a “tsunami.” This comparison to a devastating natural disaster is an acknowledgment that according to this policy, hundreds of millions of people around the world will contract a deadly disease for which there is still no highly effective and accessible cure and millions will die.

Dr. Tedros Adhomom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the WHO, has stated this week that, “Herd immunity is achieved by protecting people from a virus, not by exposing

them to it.” Theoretically, for a “herd” of people to develop social impenetrability to this virus, or the practical equivalent of immunity, roughly 80 percent of a given population must become infected by the novel virus, according to epidemiologists who have hypothesized this. In the case of Michigan, such a policy would require 6.5 million people to contract the coronavirus before this policy becomes effective at “protecting” the public from COVID-19. Until now, there have been 135,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Michigan and another 15,000 suspected cases. For these figures to increase to a combined figure of roughly 6.5 million, tens of thousands more deaths would also have to occur.

Dr. Georges Benjamin, the executive director of the American Public Health Association, told *Bridge Michigan* that relying on natural immunity to the virus to develop would leave millions of people dead across the US. These deaths will occur “from both the virus and an overloaded health system,” which would complicate the efforts of the medical community to save patients from other illnesses. Such a plan, he added, “would be malpractice [and] immoral.”

The term “herd immunity” has its origins in the field of animal husbandry, not epidemiology. When raising livestock, a top business priority is to ensure that the most fit animals are allowed to reproduce before each breeding season. Following the encroachment of a disease into a herd, the strategy of herd immunity would aim to infect the herd in order to allow the animals most susceptible to the virus to die from it quickly before the next generation of animals can become exposed to the virus as well. The priority being considered is the market value of the meat or produce from the livestock.

The application of this principle to human beings reveals the vicious and deplorable attitude that the ruling class has towards the working class, whose lives are being assessed strictly from the standpoint of their market value as a source of labor. The logic being employed is that workers who succumb to the virus can easily be replaced. The fact that the majority of the victims of COVID-19 are elderly, frees up resources which would have been channeled towards their social welfare. This is seen as a positive development in bourgeois circles, particularly those who are eager to see a “tsunami” of coronavirus cases.



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