

Washtenaw County issues stay-at-home order at University of Michigan campus in the wake of campus COVID outbreak

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The Washtenaw County Health Department (WCHD) issued an emergency press release yesterday calling for stay-at-home orders for students at the University of Michigan.

The WCHD announced that “undergraduate students must remain in their residence, unless attending class, accessing dining services, or carrying out approved work that cannot be done remotely.” Violations of the order, it declared, “are subject to the citations and penalties outlined in the Michigan Public Health Code...”

The stay-at-home order comes after a rise in cases on campus. This weekend saw the number of positive COVID-19 cases rise to over 1,000, according to the university’s Campus Blueprint dashboard.

Since the shutdown of the graduate student workers’ strike last month, students have reported that these official numbers are likely severely underestimated. The struggle of graduate students was waged in opposition to the university’s unsafe reopening plans, including in-person classes and inadequate testing.

In response to the WCHD’s order, the university administration announced that it would be “issuing new guidelines” for in-person undergraduate classes, including a further shift toward remote learning for non-essential courses, effective immediately. Many classes, however, are to remain in-person.

Since the August 21 move-in date for the semester, reports of new cases have trended upward. Last week’s count totaled 272 positive cases, which followed 215, 150, 279, 125, 71 and 39 in the previous weeks, respectively.

According to Tuesday’s emergency release, over 60 percent of Washtenaw County’s positive test results

have been linked to the University of Michigan.

Also this weekend, a spike occurred in the occupancy rate at the campus quarantine and isolation housing. More than half of available units are now in use.

An email from the University Housing Department (UHD), leaked by an outraged student on social media, revealed the department’s plan to begin moving infected individuals to non-isolated dormitories on the North Campus. Specifically, the Northwood I, II and III and Baits residence halls would be used for this purpose, according to the letter.

“This week, to help us respond to emerging needs in our community, we will be accommodating students in quarantine or isolation in units within buildings that also house regular term residents,” the memo states. “These additional rooms are part of the university’s overall inventory of quarantine and isolation housing spaces.” It sought to reassure residents that since these buildings “do not have forced air heating and cooling systems, there is no air exchange between units.”

The same student shared a video on Twitter of infected students being transferred to North Campus by the busload. “[UHD] vans are supplying apartments for quarantine housing,” the student wrote. “I don’t think people understand how many apartments there are in the Northwood residence halls, and what it means for ALL of them to be filling up. ... something is wrong with the numbers. There must be hundreds and hundreds of students in quarantine and isolation.”

On Saturday, the university’s department of Environment, Health and Safety (EHS) sent a memo to all residents and staff of the Mary Markley residence hall, which is located approximately one mile from the heart of campus, announcing that “17 positive cases on

multiple floors” had been identified, and that “several results [were] still pending.”

Markley Hall houses 1,180 students, and according to the most recent information by the UHD’s daily COVID-19 dashboard for its residents, had a total of 103 infected individuals. The dormitory saw the highest number of isolated students on campus, followed by the South Quadrangle residence hall at 47 and the West Quadrangle residence hall at 38.

There has been widespread opposition from students, campus workers, faculty and staff to the university’s reckless reopening policy.

Referring to the WCHD order, one student pointed out in a live online event the absurdity of the fact that it bans non-essential activity but still allows in-person classes.

Referring to the recently postponed push by the campus dining department (MDining) to reopen indoor, in-person dining in dormitory cafeterias, one student employee told the WSWs: “There’s a serious lack of standardization here—not only between the units of MDining, but also in workplaces across campus.”

The student continued, “I wouldn’t absolve the university of any of their mishandling of worker protections. I think our safety matters very little to them, honestly. But it’s also not a surprise at all. ... It’s very reflective of the larger philosophy by the administration toward the working class as a whole. Which is to say ... they don’t care.”

Referring to a potential solution to the problems faced by students and employees on campus in the wake of the health crisis, the student said, “This would be a fantastic moment for MDining employees to be organized, but the existing labor unions have really declined since their peak ... and both political parties are at their core very hostile toward labor as a whole.”

The recent outbreak of cases at the University of Michigan is not an isolated or unique phenomenon. More than 50 of last week’s total reported cases in Washtenaw County were in the nearby Ypsilanti area. This location is associated with another college, Eastern Michigan University (EMU), which also reopened to in-person learning in mid-September.

Students at Michigan State University, just 60 miles to the northwest of UM, have expressed similar outrage at the school administration’s reopening drive .

On campuses across the country and the world,

students, faculty and staff have engaged in strikes and protests in opposition to the reopening of schools, which has helped to fuel the spread of the pandemic.

Last week, the White House openly endorsed the Great Barrington Declaration, a manifesto written by the American Institute for Economic Research, which calls for a strategy of “herd immunity,” that is, the uncontrolled spread of the virus. This includes the demand for the resumption of in-person schooling, extracurricular activities, work and recreation.

Both parties of the ruling class understand that they cannot wage such a campaign without encountering mass opposition. The Trump administration has responded by instigating far-right violence, as revealed in the recently uncovered plots by networks of fascist militia to kidnap and assassinate the governors of Michigan and Virginia.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party is downplaying the significance of the events in Michigan and attempting to channel all social opposition into the presidential campaign of Joe Biden. The Democrats are terrified of the development of a movement in the working class against the policy of the ruling elite. In states throughout the country, the Democrats are themselves implementing the back-to-work and back-to-school campaigns demanded by the ruling class in order to pay off the bailout of Wall Street.

The struggle for safety on campuses, democratic rights, and the financial well-being of students and workers can only be waged in opposition to both big-business parties and the policy of “herd immunity” that they support.

We urge students, faculty and staff at the University of Michigan and beyond interested in carrying forward this fight to attend the online meeting of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UM tomorrow, Thursday, October 22, at 7:30 p.m. EDT, “The Michigan Fascist Plot & the 2020 Election.” Register here.



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