

“Our University is being run like a business”

## University of Michigan students denounce administration’s reckless COVID-19 policies

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One week has passed since the Washtenaw County Health Department (WCHD) issued a stay-at-home order for the University of Michigan (UMich) in response to an upsurge in COVID-19 cases on campus.

Last week’s uptick in cases brought the total infected to over 1,000, sparking widespread opposition from students and staff and garnering attention from publications such as CNN, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

According to the most recent data from the WCHD online dashboard, there has been a slight downtick in the number of cases occurring since the issuance of the order. Notwithstanding, the majority of positive cases still correspond to zip codes associated with the University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University campuses (EMU). As of Wednesday, data for the two weeks leading up to October 22, which was two days after the order, showed 580 of 828 cases occurring in university-associated areas.

Since information on outbreaks on both UMich and WCHD’s websites is reported several days behind when cases occur, it is likely that no conclusive data on the effects of the stay-at-home order will be available until next week, at the earliest.

The qualitative effect that the WCHD’s order has been having on life for students on campus has been to exacerbate the already existing tensions between the profit concerns of the administration and the safety and educational needs of the students.

An article published by the *Times* last Wednesday echoed the unsupported claims by the university administration that the recent rise in cases on campus was primarily a result of student social gatherings in which health guidelines were not being observed. Additionally, the report cited information on outbreaks among fraternities and sororities that had been published by the *Michigan Daily*, the student-run newspaper.

On the contrary, the greatest effort has been made by students to protect their lives, the lives of the university workers, and the community at large, in opposition to the diktats of the university administration. In fact, graduate student employees led a strike on the UMich campus last month, demanding the university allow for remote learning to prevent the spread of the

virus, along with a number of other protections for students, staff and university workers.

Since the sellout of the strike, students have voiced their widespread mistrust of the university administration’s contact tracing measures. Just two weeks ago, the university’s Housing Department (UHD) was forced to retreat on plans to open eat-in dining in dormitory cafeterias, in response to widespread opposition by students and staff.

An undergraduate student, who spoke anonymously to the WSWS, denounced the university’s duplicitous policy:

“People did have tailgate parties this weekend—even after the stay-at-home order was issued ... But the administration has been encouraging this kind of behavior by keeping football open, and then they just turn around just tell you it’s your fault if you get coronavirus.”

In addition, official reporting of cases is lagging far behind the actual transmission of infection. The daily memos issued by the university’s Environment, Health and Safety Department (EHS), which warn residents of possible exposures, have also been notoriously inadequate. Students have complained that these reports often will only specify the floor of the residence hall building in which persons known to be infected have been living, which house dozens of other students.

Another undergraduate student, Lynn, pointing to the conditions in student residence halls, expressed skepticism about the administration’s claim that social gatherings were the primary source of the spread of infection.

Lynn contrasted the claim of out-of-control partying by the *Times* and the administration with the conditions in her campus student housing: “I didn’t hear that there weren’t a lot of parties at UMich this weekend. My roommate and I were basically already doing everything outlined in the stay-at-home order already, so nothing much changed for us. I think that the spread of the virus is likely coming from students in their residence halls—even if they aren’t partying.”

Students have also expressed sharp hostility to the administration’s hypocrisy in blaming social gatherings on the one hand, while fully sponsoring the resumption of varsity sports and pushing the drive to reopen the campus at all costs

on the other. It is well known on the UMich campus that football and real estate are two major sources of revenue for the college.

Lynn explained her experience with extracurricular activities: “I’m not a music major, but it’s been a lifelong hobby of mine, and I play with a group on campus. While I’ve been fortunate enough to be able to safely conduct rehearsals, many others haven’t been so lucky—and I’ve even heard that the music majors are really suffering right now.

“While I’m glad that student athletes can safely continue the activity they’re passionate about, I wish that students who are passionate about other things had those opportunities as well. It’s clear that the university is only allowing athletics because it brings them money and not because they care about the well-being of the students who participate in them.”

She continued, “Our school is definitely being run like a business right now, and that has been a trend in higher education across the country for a long time, now. University presidents make a huge salary. And varsity sports are continuing now because it’s a big moneymaker, but it’s not like the college is struggling financially.”

Jeff, a first-semester freshman who is also a non-major musician, spoke about the diligence of the students in observing the safety measures: “Generally, I’ve observed students to be pretty diligent about their own safety. They’ve been taking steps to avoid contracting the virus because they don’t want to become sick or spread illness to their families at home. People have even been finding ways to socialize remotely.

“Sure, there is the occasional student who is totally ignorant of the risk factors, but I haven’t found them common. I think that the student body, for the most part, is either choosing to go out as little as possible out of an overabundance of caution, or they very calculatedly take on the risks.

“The claims that the outbreaks on campus are occurring because students are partying too much don’t even accurately reflect what faculty have been telling us about what is actually going on. I heard that the rise in campus cases in the past few weeks has been linked to many curricular activities including sports, music, dance, choir, etc. It’s not really parties.”

Jeff also spoke to the issue of the university’s policy on sports: “While I do feel safer since the Washtenaw county stay-at-home order was issued, it is an insulting blow to students that extra-curriculars have been a casualty of all of this while major sporting events continue with the financial support of the administration. My non-credit music group on campus has just been effectively shut down by this. Prior to the order, we were practicing exclusively outdoors, wearing masks and being very proactive about mitigating any potential risk factors.”

Jeff went on to explain the impact that the pandemic has had on his college experience: “This is my first semester at college, and it was a pretty weird time to be going to school in the first place. I really didn’t want to miss out on the experience of higher education. But I had to make the big decision to attend

in person knowing that there was a good chance that I could get sick. I think that I, like a lot of students, figured that it would be worth the risk if I were able to get a full, educational experience.”

Contrasting the students’ desire to return to school with the university’s desire to reopen, Jeff explained: “For the university, there are a lot of ties between the administrators and the landlords and landowners in the campus area who have a direct financial interest at stake in filling their buildings with residents. And the university itself profits from filling the dormitories as well with our tuition money.”

He continued: “I think it’s generally reflective of the main capitalist ethos, which is that money is more important than human safety. We’re really seeing that play out on campus right now. In the United States, you have high-ranking officials in both major political parties urging the public to just forget about the dangers of the virus. The idea of ‘herd immunity’ is simply a justification for body count, and the university deciding to reopen amidst the pandemic is an extension of this type of attitude. It wasn’t even the administration which issued the recent stay at home order—it was the county, and they only intervened because it became a major crisis.”

Jeff was one of the thousands of students and workers who participated in the student instructor strike near the start of the semester. Reflecting on his experience in light of recent events, Jeff explained: “It was a really inspiring event in my life. I felt a lot of strong emotions during the strike, but most memorable was how good it felt for everybody to be able to express their concerns in the public forum. There were points where we felt like, this is it, we’re going to change the course of events based on how we think the narrative should go. It was a fantastic feeling. When the construction workers on campus walked out and came on the picket line with us, we really felt like we had all the power.

“But that same day, we received the news that the strike had been shut down, and that was a devastating blow.

“We were constantly worried about sabotage not only from the administration, but also from the union. In American politics, any time there’s a popular movement to the left, it always elicits a reactionary response by the ruling class. Historically, the Democratic Party has always been a capitalist party, but what it does now is to falsely pose as a political alternative when in fact both they and the Republicans stand for the same interests. And we’ve seen a further shift to the right in the framework of capitalist politics for my whole life.”



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