

Michigan educators, autoworkers and healthcare workers: Unite to stop COVID-19 and save lives now!

Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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This is the founding statement of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Join our committee at wsws.org/edsafety.

COVID-19 has spiraled out of control across the US, and many thousands of lives are at stake this winter in Michigan. At the time of this writing, more than 420,000 of Michigan's 10 million residents have already contracted COVID-19 and 10,000 have died from it. Each day more than 7,000 new cases are detected across the state and between 100 and 200 new deaths are recorded. These rates are rising rapidly in the wake of Thanksgiving. Hospitals across the country are overflowing with COVID-19 patients, and leading doctors in Michigan have issued dire warnings that unless emergency measures are taken, a gruesome catastrophe is inevitable.

Urgent and far-reaching action is required! The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on all educators and school staff, as well as autoworkers, healthcare workers, and workers in all industries, to unite in a common struggle to save lives by stopping the spread of COVID-19.

We demand that all schools and all truly non-essential workplaces be closed immediately, and that emergency resources be made available to not only detect, contain and treat the deadly and debilitating disease in the most effective manner possible, but also to provide high-quality online education to all students and a decent and guaranteed income to everyone who has to stay home, until the pandemic has been eradicated and workplaces and schools have been deemed safe by scientists, workers and educators.

Schools and workplaces are major vectors for the spread of COVID-19 in Michigan, across the US and internationally. More than 200 outbreaks are now ongoing at K-12 schools in every part of Michigan, infecting thousands of educators, students and staff in rural, urban and suburban areas alike. The virus is also rampant in the state's auto factories, as workers themselves have shown in a series of exposures on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Shutting down both schools and workplaces is critical to stopping the spread of COVID-19 throughout communities at large, because individuals traveling between households, schools and workplaces form an interconnected network of transmission. Epidemiologists have written extensively on this question in major peer-reviewed science and medicine journals like *Nature* and the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. It is a fact that every country around the world that has closed businesses and schools has had a fall in COVID-19 cases and deaths, and every country that has eased restrictions has had an increase.

Yet K-8 schools across Michigan remain open. Factories are running full-tilt. Basic safety precautions are ignored by school boards in the first case and corporate management in the second, while both conceal the extent of the spread of COVID-19 from teachers and workers whenever

possible, fraudulently citing HIPAA laws. Those of us who refuse work in unsafe conditions are victimized, and the trade unions like the AFT Michigan and Michigan Education Association do nothing to defend us.

Educators and other workers are forced to risk infecting ourselves and our loved ones with a deadly virus in order to put food on the table. Parents are forced to send their young children to COVID-19-infested schools so they themselves can go to work in COVID-19-infested factories and workplaces. Thousands have already died in precisely this way.

But there is another side to the story. While more than 276,000 Americans have now died from COVID-19, the total wealth of the 644 billionaires in the US surged 31.6 percent between March and October, going from \$2.95 trillion to \$3.88 trillion. The wealth of the 10 richest Americans increased by \$141 billion over this period, or by \$46,850 each minute. Two American citizens—Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and Tesla CEO Elon Musk—now *each* have more than \$100 billion in personal wealth.

Death, disease and social devastation for the working class on one side, and billions for the rich on the other: these are the two basic and interconnected aspects of the bipartisan policy of “herd immunity.”

The Democrats and Republicans have made clear that they will do nothing to impinge in any way upon the vast and ever-expanding wealth of the ruling elite. Under capitalism, the basic condition for the expansion of that wealth is the uninterrupted production of commodities through the labor process. Hence, workers must continue to work, and therefore their young children must also be physically at school, no matter how many get sick and die. Michigan's Governor Gretchen Whitmer, while ordering colleges and high schools to close, has allowed K-8 and daycares to remain open so that factories can remain up and running at maximum capacity, so that obscene levels of wealth can continue to be hoarded by the ruling class.

This must be stopped!

Throughout Michigan, there exists massive opposition among educators and school staff, as well as among parents and all sections of workers, to this homicidal policy. To unify this opposition and fight for our lives, we are building fighting organizations that *we* control, and which are *completely independent* from the parties and organizations controlled by the capitalists who are profiting from our exploitation.

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is spearheading the fight to close all schools, stop the spread of COVID-19 and save lives throughout the state and region. We call on educators, students, parents, and all workers across Michigan to join us now and take up the following demands:

- **Immediately close all schools and all truly non-essential workplaces with no loss of income for workers!** The science is clear: closing schools and workplaces is a necessary part of any real plan to

contain the pandemic. It will save countless lives. The schools and truly non-essential workplaces such as auto factories must remain closed until the threat to public health is over and rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts, can ensure the safety of children, teachers and all workers. All of us must receive our full income and benefits for the duration of the pandemic. This, and all of our remaining demands, can be paid for by expropriating the country's billionaires and redistributing the \$700 billion US military budget.

• **Hire and train nurses and expand hospital capacity to meet demand!** Doctors warn that unlike the first surge of COVID-19 in Michigan in March-April, during which nurses from other states were called in to help, this time the entire country is experiencing a surge simultaneously and staff are stretched past the limit everywhere, making it impossible to treat not just COVID-19 cases, but all other life-threatening conditions. The resources hoarded by the rich must therefore also be used to immediately hire and train nurses and build emergency field hospitals. Patients must not be allowed to die in hallways awaiting treatment, and nurses and doctors must not be subjected to this psychological trauma.

• **Fully fund high-quality online public education, including free high speed Internet access for all!** The state of virtual learning is a disgrace. High quality public education for all is a social right! Computer hardware, software, Internet access, and adequate training and support must be provided to all teachers, students and parents for free. Class sizes must be reduced. Thousands of educators, staff and tech workers across Michigan must be hired to make this a reality.

• **Full income protection for parents who choose to stay home!** Educators are not oblivious to the needs of parents, as the corporate-controlled politicians are. Full income must be provided to those who cannot work because they choose to stay home with their children. Unemployment benefits and additional forms of assistance must be increased to protect families, and a permanent moratorium put in place to stop all evictions and home foreclosures.

• **Permanently cancel teacher evaluations! Stop scapegoating educators for the social crisis!** Public education has been turned upside down by the pandemic, yet teacher evaluations go on as before. Virtual teachers are observed and penalized if students aren't "highly engaged." Absurdly, some teachers are still required to host "gallery walks" in empty classrooms. But the pandemic has only highlighted the long-established role of teacher "evaluations" as a means to blame educators for a social crisis over which they have no control.

• **Publish all existing information about the spread of COVID-19 in schools and workplaces in the most comprehensive and accessible form possible!** It is evident that behind the scenes, states are carefully tracking COVID-19 outbreaks everywhere. But the information, when it is published at all, is presented in fragments, as part of a conscious attempt to conceal and downplay the danger. In reality, COVID-19 outbreaks are *never* limited to one school, one household, or one workplace. The opposite is true: *all* outbreaks are connected in *one continuous process* of transmission. To protect ourselves and our families, we require a complete and precise picture of the spread of COVID-19 in and across all locations, easily accessible to everyone.

• **Defend whistleblowers and all those who speak out against or refuse to work in unsafe conditions!** There is massive opposition everywhere, but many fear speaking up. They know they will be targeted for abuse and they know the unions will do nothing to defend them. All educators, students, or workers who reveal, speak out against, or refuse to work under unsafe conditions—whether in schools, factories, warehouses, hospitals or offices—must be defended against any victimization by employers or state officials. All workers who have been victimized must be rehired with back pay.

In issuing these demands we make no attempt to reason with or play upon the consciences of the Democrats or Republicans, whether in Washington or Lansing, nor the school boards, nor the existing trade unions. We can all see the results of their "leadership" so far: mass infection and death on a scale unprecedented in world history outside of war, along with an unprecedented *upward* redistribution of wealth. More Americans are now dying each day than died in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, while the stock market is at record highs.

Instead, we appeal to our true allies in the fight to save lives and not profit: the American and international working class!

COVID-19 does not stop at the factory turnstile, it does not need a permission slip to leave the school building, and as we have seen, it doesn't need a passport to cross borders, let alone state boundaries. To shut down *all* vectors of transmission, and to make available the vast emergency resources necessary to treat the sick and provide for the needs of everyone until the disease is eradicated—this requires the unification of educators as well as workers in key industries across Michigan, the US, and internationally.

That is why the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is founded as the Michigan-based section of a nationwide Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee network, which is growing and already includes committees in New York City (the country's largest school district), Los Angeles (second largest), as well as San Diego, Texas, Tennessee and Pennsylvania. Autoworkers at several plants in Michigan and across the Midwest have also formed new rank-and-file committees in the last year, and they are working with us. Internationally, we are connected to networks of committees of teachers and workers in the UK, Germany, and Australia via the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Michigan's three largest industries are: 1) Healthcare, with over 600,000 workers including 230,000 in hospitals alone; 2) Education, with some 390,000 workers, including 85,000 public K-12 teachers teaching 1.5 million students; and 3) Auto manufacturing, with over 175,000 workers in manufacturing per se, in addition to many more in the auto industry overall (2018 data). This is a strong basis for the building of a powerful movement of the working class in our state.

We call on all educators and support staff, including bus drivers, teachers' aides, secretaries, paraprofessionals, janitors, cooks, nurses, school psychologists, social workers, and workers from all industries, to join our network and build rank-and-file safety committees in your school or workplace. Fill out the "Join" form at wsws.org/edsafety. Whether you are a teacher or other school worker, an autoworker, healthcare worker, or you work in another industry, sign up now and we will put you in touch with a committee in your industry or help you establish a new one.

Don't wait! The pandemic can in fact be stopped through rational and scientific action on the part of the working class. The fact that several COVID-19 vaccines are under development makes it all the more critical that every measure is taken to immediately contain the virus and save as many lives as possible until such a vaccine becomes widely available.



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