

Student government delegates at the University of Michigan speak out against the administration's COVID-19 policies

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On November 16, the University of Michigan (UMich) Central Student Government held a public, online question and answer session with university President Mark Schlissel. While the event was intended to provide students with information about upcoming changes in campus health procedures in light of what proved to be a disastrous and recklessly planned fall semester, it quickly turned into a platform for students to denounce the role of Schlissel and his administration.

Since March 8, nearly 3,000 positive cases have been recorded between four university departments that are conducting testing, according to the UMich official dashboard. Roughly 2,650 of these cases occurred after the week beginning August 23, two days after the official move-in date for the semester.

The decision to reopen the university residence halls and conduct in-person learning immediately provoked opposition from the student body, culminating in a nine-day strike in September by graduate student instructors, members of the Graduate Employee Organization (GEO). The strike won widespread support from undergraduates and campus employees, as well as students and workers across the country.

The main demand of the grad instructors was the universal right to teach remotely in the midst of a pandemic that remained out of control and under conditions where the university had done nothing serious to safeguard the health of instructors and students alike.

The strikers also demanded increased resources to assist grad students whose education was being disrupted by the pandemic and the decoupling of the university's Department of Public Safety & Security (DPSS) from police organizations.

The *World Socialist Web Site* appraised the strike as an expression of the broader growth of opposition in the working class to the bipartisan capitalist policy of "herd immunity," whose main components were the back-to-work and back-to-school drives demanded by the financial oligarchy. It took place in the context of spreading protests by educators and students to the reopening of schools, including the formation of educators' rank-and-file safety committees in a number of states.

The strike was ultimately shut down and betrayed by the pro-corporate American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent organization of the GEO, working in conjunction with the Democratic Party state administration of Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The AFT used the threat of a court injunction and the promotion of divisive racial politics to push through a return to work on the basis of a contract that granted none of the strikers' main demands.

Immediately after the end of the strike, COVID-19 cases on the UMich campus began to surge. Students were angered by the university's negligent policies, including inadequate testing, reporting and quarantining measures, combined with a continuous push to reopen facilities rather than working to contain the impact of the pandemic. On October 20, the Washtenaw County Health Department issued a stay-at-home order for all undergraduates in an effort to curb the increase in new infections.

The policies for the upcoming winter semester include a reduction in face-to-face learning, a restriction on campus residence to those with no other options, and mandatory weekly testing. However, many students view the administration's backtracking as an effort to save face and cover up its responsibility for the health disaster.

Sam Burnstein, a Literature, Science and Art (LSA) School representative to the Central Student Government, said the following during the November 16 Q&A session with President Schlissel:

"Looking at this administration over the last eight months, it feels like it's been a mess. I've always had an immense sense of pride in the University of Michigan... but for the first time in my eight years of living in Ann Arbor, I've honestly felt a genuine sense of embarrassment when I tell people that I go to [this school], from being one of the last public universities to announce online classes in March, to raising tuition by 1.9 percent in June, to [the president] receiving a vote of no confidence by the faculty for the first time ever, and the week-long student employment strike... to the dearth of testing on campus, to the [Washtenaw County Health Department] stay-at-home order that was made as a result of off-campus partying,

which was a result of improper enforcement...to the absolute mess that was the quarantine housing... to being one of the last Big Ten schools to implement a pass/no record Covid grading scheme after hundreds of students have already dropped classes because of their grades..."

Burnstein added, "The question that a lot of Michigan students have is why weren't these [upcoming] changes made from the outset?"

Zackariah Farah, another LSA student government representative who criticized Schlissel at the Q&A session, spoke with the WWSWS about the wider political issues facing university students at UMich and beyond.

"I am deeply disappointed in the lack of accountability of the U of M administration and, in particular, of President Mark Schlissel. This year we witnessed a serious lack of COVID-19 preparation, which put students and faculty at risk, the vicious legal attacks from the administration on the GEO, and a complete failure to address the very justified concerns of the members of Central Student Government. Although the administration is taking this situation more seriously going into next semester, the students and faculty of this university deserved far better leadership from this university in a time of economic hardship and the ongoing health crisis.

"I, along with many other students, certainly do not feel proud of being a student at this prestigious university after we failed to help the most vulnerable members of our community. While I myself haven't necessarily ever been a flag-waving 'Go Blue' type, I know many who have been completely shattered by this. I think that irreparable harm has already been done."

When asked if he thought that the UMich administration had been implementing the policy of 'herd immunity,' Farah replied, "I don't think that the administration intended to implement a policy of 'herd immunity.' Rather, they went on the idea that students are 'low-risk,' so they just didn't care, or didn't even see it as a problem. They figured that they were going to lose a lot of money if they closed down the campus."

He continued, "But 'herd immunity' was never a viable option for protecting people, anyway. We saw it fail in other countries this summer, like in Sweden and the UK. Their governments acted on the idea that young people aren't at risk, while the more vulnerable members of society should be staying at home, isolated. But the current numbers are ample evidence that that obviously didn't work."

Farah discussed what he believed to be the underlying motivations of the administration's disastrous approach. "The decisions by the university have always been about profit," he said. "A large chunk of U of M's income comes from its hospital complex, whereas only about 15 percent comes from tuition." He referred to figures in the university's publicly available Consolidated Annual Financial Report, which state that approximately \$4.8 billion of the institution's \$14.5 billion in net position for 2020 came from the University of Michigan

Health System's patient care revenue.

He continued, "Although not directly related, U of M also invests considerable amounts of money every year in the stock of fossil fuel companies. While the Board of Regents has said that it would consider divesting from this industry, it's been a year and they haven't said anything. They've been very opaque. So, on top of the current public health crisis that it's facing, why is the university contributing toward a separate environmental crisis? It's yet another example of the prioritization of private profit above everything else."

Farah also spoke about the 2020 US presidential election and the attempted coup by the Trump administration. "I was really hoping that the Democratic Party would be pushed to the left this year," he said. "But it's just so weird to me that grassroots movements in our country need to pressure the establishment parties to accept things like universal health care and caring for the environment. These are really not such radical ideas. It's sad to see that the only alternative to the far-right rulers in our system is just the liberal wing of the same corporate elite."

"While I do have disagreements with the overall democratic process in the US, I don't believe that there were as many as five million false votes for Biden. Take, for example, what happened in the 2000 presidential election in Florida. When there was a legitimate demand for a recount, it was suppressed by the Supreme Court. What we're seeing now is a different side of the ultimate outcome of that."

"The threat posed by Trump to overthrow the election results should not be dismissed. But the Democratic Party simply wrote him off as being a sore loser and a whiney baby. In fact, Trump was laying the groundwork for something incredibly dangerous, that is, the destruction of democracy, and whether or not he will succeed, this needs to be taken very seriously."

Referring to meetings held by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) on the University of Michigan campus on the US elections, Zackariah said, "I'm in support of the fact that the IYSSE has sharply opposed Trump's coup attempt from the outset."

He also denounced the recent censoring of the IYSSE's social media account by Twitter, as well as Facebook's blocking of the IYSSE's November online event titled "Trump's Electoral Coup and the Threat of Dictatorship."

"Organizations who are doing incredible journalism, like the WWSWS, should not be censored," he said. "To remove accounts with no explanation just isn't democratic. I want to thank the IYSSE and the SEP for being as concerned as they are with issues that are so closely bound up with the fate of humanity."



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