New COVID-19 variant B.1.1.7 identified at the University of Michigan

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As of January 25, there have been six cases of a new COVID-19 variant, B.1.1.7, identified in Washtenaw County, Michigan. Of those cases, five have been associated with the University of Michigan Ann Arbor (UMich) campus.

The Washtenaw County Health Department (WCHD) and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) announced on January 16 that the variant was discovered in a local woman, who had recently traveled to the United Kingdom. On January 21, two other individuals who had been in close contact with the woman initially infected were also diagnosed with the B.1.1.7 strain. All three women were associated with the university.

By January 23, the MDHHS identified two more cases of the variant in individuals associated with the university and an additional case in the Wayne County area.

"B.1.1.7 spreads more easily between people, but there has been no indication that it affects the clinical outcomes or disease severity compared to the SARS-CoV-2 virus that has been circulating across the United States for months," according to the January 23 MDHHS briefing.

Contrary to the latest information from MDHHS, however, a document covering a study by the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) in the UK from January 21 said that "there is a realistic probability that infection with B.1.1.7 is associated with an increased risk of death compared to infection with non-VOC (non-variant of concern)." Additionally, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson acknowledged on Twitter January 22 that the new strain "may also be associated with a higher degree of mortality."

A Sunday announcement by GoBlue.com, the university's news site, said that the school's Athletic Department would immediately cease activity for up to 14 days, in compliance with an MDHHS mandate relating to the B.1.1.7 variant. "The (MDHHS) is mandating a more aggressive strategy for this B.1.1.7 variant, which exceeds current program efforts designed around the standard form of the virus," the article read. It specified that individuals infected with the new strain on campus had been diagnosed by the Athletic Department's own facilities.

UMich President Mark Schlissel published a briefing on the same day addressed to members of the campus community, in which he acknowledged that the variant is known to be "more contagious" and that "[n]ew information suggests that this strain might be more likely to cause severe illness." He advised students to take extra precautions.

Schlissel's announcement also noted, "We're also seeing additional clusters of the regular COVID-19 virus in the campus community and are monitoring and addressing those as well."

In a January 19 *Michigan Daily* interview with Schlissel, he explained that while the campus's medical systems were suited for vaccine distribution, limited state supply made it unlikely that vaccines would be available until after the current semester.

The UMich winter semester began on January 19, following a fall term which saw widespread opposition by students and campus workers to the administration's reckless reopening policies. A nine-day strike in September was led by the Graduate Employees' Organization union and garnered the support of broad layers of the campus for the universal right to remote learning. The strike was ultimately canceled by the union leadership in collaboration with the American Federation of Teachers, its parent organization, which

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cowered in the face of legal threats by the administration.

The university was doubtlessly forced by explosive popular opposition to implement mandatory mitigation measures for the new semester. Last term, the number of total positive cases quickly rose to approximately 3,000, and positivity rates rose as high as 7.6 percent in late September. The new measures for the winter term include the reduction in capacity of on-campus residential buildings, stricter penalties for health code violations, as well as a drastic reduction of in-person learning.

While these new guidelines ostensibly provide respite from the uncontrolled spread of the pandemic, the rapidly emerging threat of B.1.1.7 underscores the fact that nothing has systematically changed to prevent the further spread of the deadly infection. As long as the virus remains unchecked on local, national and international levels, there cannot be a fully reliable method to contain it while campus activity is resumed. At the same time, the university, acting in concert with mandates by the capitalist state, insists that no action be taken which fundamentally impedes the resumption of the accumulation of its profit.

The resumption of the UMich semester occurs within the context of a Biden administration committed no less than that of Donald Trump to the full-scale reopening of schools and businesses in the midst of a pandemic that has already claimed over 430,000 lives in the US since February 2020. While Biden glosses over the fascistic insurrection of January 6, issuing calls for “unity” and “bipartisanship,” he has openly claimed that the deaths of hundreds of thousands of more Americans are all but inevitable. No one should be deceived into thinking that the token health measures proposed by the new administration are anything but a rebranding of the same policies which serve the interests of Wall Street.

Students and campus workers must immediately demand the shutdown of all nonessential university activities, with full refunds for tuition and residential expenses, as well as full compensation for any wages lost. Students with privately held, off-campus leases should build and coordinate with student-worker neighborhood committees to demand the nullification of all rental contracts rendered obsolete due to COVID-19. They should demand that affordable housing and extended visas be provided for international students with no way to return home.

These demands can be fought for and won, but they require the parallel development of a national and international network of committees of independent political struggle by the working class and a political party to unite them in the broader fight for the socialist transformation of society. We urge all students interested in advancing this task to seriously consider joining the Socialist Equality Party or becoming involved in its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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