

Duke undergraduates ordered to shelter in place amid rapid spike in COVID-19 cases

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On Saturday, Duke University in Durham, North Carolina issued an order for all undergraduate students to shelter in place, citing a recent spike in positive COVID-19 cases. “Effective at midnight, Saturday, March 13, all Duke undergraduate students are required to stay-in-place until 9 a.m., Sunday, March 21,” wrote three administrators in the initial email to students Saturday.

“If this feels serious, it’s because it is,” they added later on in the same email.

The order follows the largest one-week rise on campus since the beginning of the pandemic last March, with 180 students in isolation from a positive test, and 200 students in quarantine as a result of contact tracing measures. According to the university’s COVID Dashboard, over 300 students have tested positive this semester, more than twice the total of positive test results from the entire fall semester.

For a week, all in person classes, including labs, have been shifted online, and on-campus students are required to remain in their residence halls at all times, except for essential activities related to food, health, or safety. Students living off campus will not be permitted on university grounds, except to participate in testing or to visit the Student Health Center.

The administration is attempting to shift the blame for the outbreak squarely on the students. The email sent to students announcing the shelter-in-place order explicitly says that the recent case spike is tied to “students attending recruitment parties for selective living groups.” Previously, the university said many new cases were tied to events organized by fraternities that had disaffiliated from the university, the *Duke Chronicle* reported.

Despite the role celebrations or other social campus activities play in the spread of the virus, the attempt to

scapegoat students for the outbreak is a dishonest effort to cover over the culpability of the university administration itself. The conditions in student dormitories, classrooms, labs, and even off campus housing, are simply not conducive to proper social distancing measures.

School administrations are fully aware of the devastating impact that school reopenings had on students, teachers and staff, along with the broader community in college towns throughout the country, during the fall semester. Towns and cities with colleges that reopened for in-person learning, or which, for one reason or another, allowed large numbers of students to return to their dorms, quickly become some of the worst hot spots in the country.

In fact, recent research published in the science journalism website *Science News*, “How 5 Universities tried to handle COVID-19 on campus: Fall semester was the start of a big experiment,” shows that in-person education remains a breeding ground for the spread of the pandemic.

With campuses reopening and bringing students back, *Science News* writer Betsy Ladyzhets found a 56 percent increase in COVID-19 cases during the three-week period of in-person instruction in comparison to the three weeks before, when the universities offered remote learning. The piece also found that in the same counties where universities offered remote learning, COVID-19 cases dropped by almost 18 percent.

Despite the dire state of the pandemic, the deadly experience of the fall semester, and the immense amount of scientific evidence advising against reopening, Duke, along with dozens of other campuses, went ahead with their spring reopening plans.

Universities are hoping the invocation of “personal responsibility” of students will be sufficient to contain

outbreaks. It should go without saying that the task of keeping campuses safe is not primarily, let alone solely, the responsibility of students.

In continuing to keep the university open, gathering over 15,000 students into a concentrated area, the Duke administration is following the lead of the entire American bourgeois political establishment in allowing the virus to rip through the population, come what may.

Even as the scientific community is raising the alarm on the catastrophic threat that newly emerging variants of the virus pose to public health, federal and state governments are intensifying the drive-back-to-work campaign and the full-scale reopening of schools. All policies to control and contain the pandemic are pushed aside in the interests of the profit motive of the elite, even while countless students, teachers, and workers throughout the community die from the virus.

The reopening of campuses now is all the more criminal when one considers that coronavirus vaccines are expected to be widely available around the time of the end of the spring semester. In other words, with a medical solution to the pandemic in sight, colleges and universities are taking action that will serve to maximize the number of deaths before it can be realized.

In opposition to these policies, teachers, students and other workers across the US and internationally have been at the forefront of the fight for safe conditions and a rational, scientifically guided public health policy to control the pandemic.

In September, over 1200 University of Michigan graduate students went on strike for 9 days against the unsafe reopening of campus, though their struggle was betrayed by the American Federation of Teachers union. Just this week, graduate students at Columbia University have begun striking for better working and living conditions, while graduate students and New York University are threatening similar actions.

Teachers, particularly at K-12 schools, have conducted sickouts, work stoppages, and strikes against the unsafe reopening plans since the beginning of the pandemic last March.

To organize this struggle, the *World Socialist Web Site* has facilitated the creation of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the corporate-controlled trade unions, in dozens of cities and states across the country and internationally.

The way forward for workers, students and teachers alike in their struggle against the back-to-work and back-to-school campaign must be based on an understanding of the class forces at play which have shaped the murderous policies that have been implemented so far. The spread of the COVID-19 virus is not the fault of a small section of students but is the outcome of a deliberate policy being pursued by the ruling class.

We urge students and workers to draw the necessary conclusions from the last year of the pandemic: If there is going to be opposition to the policy of the ruling class it will only come from the working class, organized independently with its own socialist program.



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