

As pandemic surges in Michigan, Governor Whitmer refuses to close schools

Zac Corrigan
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COVID-19 has spiraled out of control in the state of Michigan, which is leading the United States into yet another surge of the pandemic. Immediate action is required to save thousands of lives over the coming weeks, and workers around the world must also study the situation here and learn the political lessons in order to avert similar catastrophes everywhere.

Michigan's seven-day moving average of daily new cases has now even surpassed the peak of the fall/winter surge, reaching its highest level ever, 7,602 new cases reported per day, on Friday, April 9. The state's test positivity rate is now 16 percent, the highest in the US mainland, and its daily case rate of 70.2 per 100,000 people is far higher than the second highest rate, 43.0, in New Jersey.

The new surge in Michigan is being fueled by the B.1.1.7 variant, which is 50 to 75 percent more contagious than the original strain and disproportionately affects young people. B.1.1.7 is now the dominant variant circulating in the United States. In Michigan, it accounts for an estimated 70 percent of new cases, which some doctors have characterized as a "new pandemic."

Michigan's rate has increased by a factor of seven since bottoming out at around 1,100 new cases per day in mid-February. Throughout this period, the number one vector for transmission by far was K-12 school buildings, which are open for face-to-face learning on a district-by-district basis across the state. This is according to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services' own figures.

In fact, the rise in school-related outbreaks *preceded* the rise in cases statewide, showing that schools are actually driving the pandemic and not simply reflecting it. After the virus spread rapidly through school buildings, the infected teachers, students and workers brought it home to their families and into their communities.

Hundreds more outbreaks also took place at school sporting events. Together, schools, sports and day cares have been the source of 40 percent of the state's total recorded outbreaks during the new surge. The next most likely places to catch COVID-19 were factories and construction sites, followed by nursing homes, retail businesses and office settings.

Hospitals are again filling up, as they did last spring and fall, but this time the largest rise in COVID-19 hospitalizations took place among those aged 19 and under. By last Wednesday, hospitals across the state had already started canceling surgeries and implementing "surge protocols" to make room for rising numbers

of COVID-19 patients. Over the weekend, non-COVID-19 patients of all kinds waited for hours as Detroit's emergency rooms were overwhelmed by the surge.

Under these conditions, Governor Gretchen Whitmer and her medical adviser held an astonishing press conference on Friday morning in which they reviewed this catastrophic situation in great detail, presented the numbers using charts and graphs, and then proceeded to announce that there would be no change in policy in Michigan—no new restrictions or lockdowns of any kind.

"Because we are seeing so many new cases a day, our health system is overwhelmed," explained Dr. Johnneigh Khaldun, Whitmer's coronavirus adviser. "We are not able to get information on many cases. Nor are we able to identify their close contacts. We don't know where all the cases and outbreaks are, and what we do know is likely an undercount," she said.

Whitmer declared, "Doing your part looks like wearing your mask, it looks like being smart about social distancing and hand washing." She then urged high schools to "voluntarily" extend their spring breaks for two weeks and to temporarily suspend school sports.

"To be very clear these are not orders, mandates or requirements," she emphasized. Within less than 24 hours, districts across the state began announcing that they would ignore the governor's voluntary calls and would continue sports and practices as scheduled with no pause.

Whitmer's new slogan, repeated over and over again, is "Michigan doesn't have a policy problem, we have a compliance problem." According to this amazing theory, the government has done exactly what was needed to fight the pandemic, and it is individual workers and youth who are to blame for failing to mask up and stay home. Dr. Khaldun actually said, "Just because something is open, it does not mean that it is safe or that you should do it."

The Governor refused to specify how students in overcrowded and badly ventilated schools or autoworkers in the factories are supposed to "comply" with her guidelines, or how Amazon workers are supposed to wash their hands when they do not even have access to a toilet.

Whitmer touted the state's vaccination program, calling it "the best way" to stop the virus. But she then admitted that at the expected rate it will likely be months before enough Michiganders have been vaccinated to cause the pandemic to subside and that President Biden was even denying her requested "surge" in

vaccines to counter the rise in cases in the state. “We’re going to have some tough weeks ahead,” she said.

Keeping schools open in Michigan is critical to bolstering similarly dangerous reopening plans scheduled for the next weeks in major districts across the country. Today, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second-largest in the US, is set to begin reopening elementary schools. Initial surveys indicate that roughly 200,000 of the district’s 665,000 students are expected to return for in-person learning. On April 19, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is set to begin reopening high schools, despite elementary schools already becoming hotbeds of infection throughout the city. Portland, Seattle and other major districts are also preparing to reopen.

Whitmer, a Democrat, is charged with carrying out the policy of the Biden administration, which is to reopen the economy and schools as quickly as possible everywhere no matter how high the body count so that profit-making can continue and accelerate. *Forbes* just wrote in its annual report on the superrich that the last year has seen the “greatest acceleration of wealth” in history, with the billionaires increasing their wealth by 60 percent since the pandemic began, making \$1.7 million for each of the more than 2.9 million dead from COVID-19 worldwide.

In particular, Michigan is the center of North American auto production, and it is these giant corporations, employing hundreds of thousands of workers in Detroit and across the state, on whose behalf Whitmer acts. Faced with the challenge of forcing the largest number of workers possible back into disease-infested factories, schools are being forced open so workers with young children can report to work.

On March 16, 2020, Michigan became the 13th state to close its schools in response to the sudden first emergence of the pandemic, but the factories were kept running. On March 17 and 18, autoworkers in Detroit walked out—in defiance of their union, the UAW—shutting down the auto industry for two months. Whitmer then instituted a limited lockdown on March 24, but explicitly exempted the auto factories as “critical infrastructure” which must be reopened as soon as possible.

Following the partial shutdowns in March, the ruling class handed trillions of dollars to itself through the CARES Act, signed into law on March 27. This was followed immediately by the demand that workers return to their jobs. The Trump administration incited fascistic forces, including in Michigan, to demand an end to even the most minimal restraints on the spread of the pandemic.

On April 30 of last year, in a rehearsal for Trump’s January 6 coup attempt in Washington, fascist militia members rallied at the Michigan state Capitol in Lansing to demand a full reopening. Some of them entered the building with assault rifles. Less than a month later the Big Three auto companies were allowed to resume production.

On October 8, 2020, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation revealed the existence of a far-reaching plot by anti-lockdown activists to kidnap and kill Whitmer and overthrow the state government. Their main slogan was an end to all measures to contain the pandemic. Seven months later, in the midst of a disastrous surge of the pandemic, Whitmer has effectively

embraced this central demand of the Michigan plotters.

Between August and November, as more and more school districts across Michigan returned for in-person learning over the course of the fall semester, COVID-19 exploded in the state, reaching a peak during the week of Thanksgiving. On November 16, Whitmer ordered only high schools to go all virtual for the last weeks of the semester. Though there were more than 100 ongoing outbreaks at K-8 schools at the time, these were allowed to remain face-to-face so that parents of young children could report to work.

The normal closure of schools for the winter holiday break brought the case rate in Michigan down to less than 1,100 per day. But as expected, the resumption of in-person learning since January has once again caused the pandemic to surge to catastrophic proportions, this time with an even more contagious variant.

The same pandemic policies pursued by Trump have now been continued seamlessly under Biden. And the Trump/Biden/Whitmer policy of putting profits over lives is pursued, in its essentials, in every state of the country and indeed in every country in the world.

But the last year has not been lived in vain, and workers are beginning to draw political conclusions from this tragic experience.

During the pandemic, workers in Michigan, including educators and autoworkers, have formed rank-and-file safety committees in schools and factories. These must be expanded and broadened to every section of the working class, in Michigan, the US and throughout the world.

These committees are uniting opposition to the deadly conditions at schools and workplaces and fighting for policies based on the interests of public health not private profit. This includes the immediate shutdown of nonessential production; the closure of all school buildings, with a switch to high-quality virtual learning; full income to workers; and real support for small businesses.

There is plenty of wealth in society to support and protect everyone until the pandemic is contained. But for workers to get hold of it requires a fight not simply against the virus but against the capitalist system.



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