

Educators and workers must take control of the response to the global pandemic!

Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
24 May 2021

Sixteen months after COVID-19 was first detected, what is the state of the global pandemic? There's no end in sight. Worldwide, more than 12,000 people die from COVID-19 every day, with more than 500 deaths each day in the US. New studies estimate that upwards of 10 million people have lost their lives to the virus so far. More Americans have now died from COVID-19 than in all wars of the 20th century combined.

As the pandemic goes on and on, new and ever more contagious variants continue to evolve, appearing first in one part of the globe and quickly spreading to others. The latest is B.1.617.2, the Indian variant, which is now ripping through the United Kingdom, 4,000 miles from where it was first detected.

Michigan was ravaged this year by the B.1.1.7 variant, which first appeared in the UK. It spread like wildfire through schools and factories throughout the state, where workers and youth are packed like sardines into badly ventilated classrooms and work areas all day—ideal conditions for an aerosolized virus like the coronavirus. Hospitals and emergency rooms across the state once again overflowed with COVID-19 patients, this time including record numbers of children.

Yet in Michigan and all over the world, the ruling elite is pretending that the pandemic is over and abandoning any remaining measures to contain it. In the US, the daily death and case counts are no longer reported on the nightly news. The CDC says there is no need for vaccinated people to wear masks indoors anymore, absurdly relying on the “honor system,” while children can sit three feet apart in schools. Governor Whitmer has opened the floodgates, allowing retailers, restaurants, stadiums and other venues to open at 50 percent capacity, with no intention of enforcing compliance.

While there is massive opposition among rank-and-file workers and teachers to these deadly policies, the official trade unions are dedicated to reopening everything no matter how high the body count. On the same day that the CDC suddenly announced the end of mask mandates, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten said that “nothing should stand in the way of fully reopening our public schools this fall and keeping them open,” because “parents rely on schools, not only to educate their kids, but so they can work.”

Weingarten let the cat out of the bag: The real reason schools must be opened is so that working parents can be sent back to work. If schools were allowed to close just because they are incubating a deadly virus, a subsidized income would have to be provided to parents so they can quarantine safely at home with their children until the pandemic is really over. But this is completely out of bounds as far as the ruling class is concerned, because at the same time that millions

of workers have died from COVID-19, the rich have increased their wealth beyond comprehension.

In the first year of the pandemic, the world's billionaires expanded their wealth by a staggering 60 percent in the “greatest acceleration of wealth in history,” according to Forbes magazine. Weingarten herself is a millionaire and takes home a base salary of roughly \$500,000 per year, paid for by the union dues of rank-and-file teachers.

When the pandemic first emerged, the would-be fascist dictator Donald Trump was president of the United States. Many workers hoped that the administration of Democrat Joe Biden would bring with it a more rational response. Instead, the same unscientific policies and manipulation of the CDC continue.

The main difference between the Biden and Trump approaches to the pandemic is that while Trump sought to mobilize armed, fascistic forces against the shutdown of schools and nonessential production, Biden is instead attempting to use the unions to divide and conquer working class opposition. In particular, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a pseudo-left faction within the Democratic Party, has been mobilized to expand the grip of Biden's state-controlled unions and stop workers from building new, independent organizations of struggle.

But having long since been integrated into the state and the corporations they were formed to oppose, the rotten organizations still called “unions” have not led a struggle in 40 years and now act as junior partners in the exploitation of the working class. Far from representing a preferable alternative to Trump and the fascists, the unions' repeated betrayals of workers struggles will only create the conditions for the growth of the far right.

Despite these efforts to contain the class struggle, at schools and workplaces across Michigan opposition to the ruling class response to the pandemic is emerging outside of and against the unions.

In Grosse Pointe, educators organized a wildcat sickout independently of their union after the school board ignored their pleas to reduce in-person learning. Autoworkers in Detroit have stopped the line and even walked out to protect themselves after workers tested positive on the job. Teachers across the state are retiring in record numbers, and so many autoworkers, retail workers and food service workers have refused to work in unacceptable conditions that these industries are complaining of a “labor shortage.”

We, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, are fighting to unite this opposition of rank-and-file educators and workers in Michigan and take control of the response to the pandemic away from the ruling elites and into our own hands. We demand the following:

- Stop all nonessential production and provide full income to

workers until the pandemic is really contained, and it is safe to return.

- Close all K-12 schools for in-person learning.
- Fully fund high-quality virtual learning, including high-speed broadband access for all and expert technical support to train and assist educators.
- Subsidize income for parents who choose to stay home with their children.

While opposing the reckless reopening of schools, we recognize that in many cases teachers are being forced back in. Under these conditions, we will continue to fight for school closures while demanding that the following safety measures be universally implemented:

- Masks must continue to be worn indoors. We oppose the CDC's unscientific lifting of the mask mandate.
- For the immediate modernization of HVAC systems for all schools.
- Nurses must be employed at every school and provided the resources to conduct daily testing of students, teachers and staff.
- Full and accurate reporting of all cases among students, staff and associated households, along with robust contact tracing.
- Paid sick time for all those infected with COVID-19 and for those caring for them.
- Resources for those suffering from COVID-19-related physical, mental and/or emotional trauma.

Moreover, we are taking the struggle of Michigan educators and workers to the next level by connecting them to rank-and-file committees across the US and internationally. The pandemic is a global crisis requiring a global response. There are more than enough resources in society to protect and provide for everyone until the pandemic is contained, but in order to use these resources in a rational way, which prioritizes lives over corporate profits, workers need to build mass organizations that they actually control and that are connected globally.

That is why we are affiliated with the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee network, which since its founding in August of 2020 has built committees of educators in Alabama, California, Canada, Michigan, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas. We are also connected to the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Safety Committee network, which has built committees at auto plants in Michigan, Indiana, and Virginia.

And we enthusiastically endorse the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). As David North said in his May Day speech calling for the formation of this international alliance, "The aim of this global initiative is to develop a genuine broad-based movement of the international working class and to encourage workers in all countries to break out of the prison-like shackles in which they are confined by the existing state-controlled and antidemocratic unions, staffed by right-wing pro-capitalist executives."

The main lesson of the last year and a half is that putting an end to the pandemic requires that workers build new organizations of struggle. Join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today, and take up the fight for the political independence of the working class!

Greetings to workers struggles around the world

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee sends revolutionary greetings to all workers engaged in struggle across the US and around the world, and in particular the following:

- **Three thousand Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia**, who, under the leadership of our affiliated Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, are demanding a 25 percent wage increase and more in a struggle against the "toilet paper" contract proposed by the United Auto Workers union (UAW).

- **Reinstate victimized London bus driver David O'Sullivan**, who was sacked for upholding workers' rights to health and safety during the pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than 60 bus workers in London. O'Sullivan is a member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, which is leading his defense campaign.

- **Two thousand five hundred Nexteer autoworkers** in Saginaw, Michigan, who are fighting against a similar sellout contract that the same UAW is attempting to ram through, amid suspicions of ballot rigging.

- **One thousand three hundred steelworkers in Pennsylvania** and other states, who have been on strike for more than eight weeks at Allegheny Technologies Inc (ATI), where the United Steel Workers (USW) union has presented them with a contract that includes wage cuts and the continuation of the hated two-tier system.

- **Eleven hundred miners in Brookwood, Alabama**, on strike for seven weeks to fight unsafe and abusive working conditions and restore previous pay cuts. The United Mine Workers union (UMW) has isolated the striking miners and forced them to fight alone against Warrior Met Coal and the Wall Street investors who run it.

- **Seven hundred nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts** who have been on strike fighting for safe staffing ratios at St. Vincent Hospital for more than 10 weeks. Their union, the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA), is not providing them with strike pay.

Hands off Gaza! No to imperialist war!

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee unequivocally condemns the US-Israeli onslaught against the people of Gaza. Hundreds of thousands of people in southeast Michigan alone have family members in the Middle East and are directly affected by these atrocities.

The efforts of the Biden administration to strengthen the grip of the state-controlled unions over the US working class are an essential part of its far advanced plans to force the population into another major war with rivals like China and Russia.

Just as the working class of the world must unite to stop the global pandemic, workers in the US must unite with their class brothers and sisters in the Middle East, Russia, China and all countries in a global fight against imperialist war and for social equality.



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