Detroit Federation of Teachers agrees to reopen schools as vaccination rates stall

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The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is organizing opposition to the homicidal drive to reopen schools as the Delta variant spreads throughout the region. Contact us today to get involved.

On Monday, the Detroit Public Schools Community District and the Detroit Federation of Teachers announced that they had signed a Letter of Agreement (LOA) to fully reopen the school district for in-person instruction this fall.

The signing of the LOA, which is titled "2021-22 Full Reopening of Schools," once again exposes the antidemocratic character of the trade unions. Rank-and-file teachers had no role whatsoever in determining the contents of the deal, and it remains to be seen if the DFT will even hold a vote on the plan or simply work with the district to enforce it.

The drive to reopen Detroit schools takes place amid a broader nationwide push by the Biden administration to fully reopen schools nationwide, with the full backing of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the teachers unions.

Three weeks ago, the CDC issued guidelines calling for the full reopening of schools and for vaccinated students and staff not to wear masks. This was suddenly reversed on Tuesday amid mounting opposition among educators and parents as the Delta coronavirus variant is spreading like wildfire across the US and globally.

The city of Detroit has had 51,851 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 2,312 confirmed deaths, figures which threaten to skyrocket in the coming weeks and months as schools fully reopen. Only 40 percent of Detroit residents have received at least one dose of a vaccine.

Vaccination rates in Detroit are similar to those in Missouri, Arkansas and Florida, which are the current epicenters for the Delta variant in the US and have all seen surges in child hospitalizations.

As the chart above indicates, cases in Michigan overall have been relatively stable since the closure of schools in May and June. The state has a total of 899,921 confirmed cases and 19,883 deaths from COVID-19. Cases are once again rising, with an average of 421 reported cases and seven deaths each day over the past week.

The LOA between the DPS and the DFT was signed on July 15 but evidently not finalized until Monday. In a press release announcing the finalization of the LOA, DPS Superintendent Nikolai Vitti declared: "We are all excited to have our students back in schools and classrooms in the fall. … Everyone did their part to keep each other safe and supported."

In fact, the agreement is a recipe for disaster. It stipulates that class sizes will only be reduced by three to eight students depending on the grade level, with high school classes remaining at 30 students per class and middle school classes at 27. Class sizes will be 22 for grades K-2 and 25 for grades 3-5, where all students will be unvaccinated.

While masking will be required, nothing will be done to improve ventilation in the district's dilapidated, mold-infested buildings that are ripe for spreading the airborne coronavirus. Point 17 stipulates merely that "any unit member may request a fan or air purifier for their classroom or office," with nothing about renovating HVAC systems, providing HEPA filters, CO2 sensors or other essential ventilation equipment.

The LOA continues the corporatist "Labor-Management Committee on Schools Reopening," which consists of three district and three union appointees who meet weekly to discuss the school reopening campaign.

In his press release, Vitti added: "This agreement signals that we are all on the same page to restart our reform efforts that had great momentum before the pandemic. With a much-needed infusion of one-time federal COVID relief funding, we will be able to effectively address absenteeism, learning loss, mental health and many of our long-term facility needs."

This is a total fraud. Detroit Public Schools was allocated nearly $1.2 billion in federal pandemic relief funds and is projected to have a budget surplus of roughly $152 million for fiscal year 2021-22, in addition to $19.6 million from recent state legislation. Undoubtedly, the funding exists to fully renovate buildings with necessary safety provisions, increase teacher pay and hire many more teachers to reduce class sizes and improve instruction. However, none of this is being done by the district.

One of the most inflammatory and absurd parts of the LOA is Point 16, which stipulates that if a teacher becomes infected with COVID-19 and "is sent home from an in-person assignment by the District to self-quarantine due to potential or

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actual COVID-19 exposure and is asymptomatic, the member shall deliver instruction remotely to ensure continuity of student learning." Evidently, only if teachers become bedridden or hospitalized will DPS and DFT allow them to stop working.

At a union meeting last Wednesday where the LOA was introduced to members, outraged teachers rightly commented that the agreement disregards the safety of both students and teachers. Many called for the continuation of remote learning until January, when students under 12 years old might become eligible to be vaccinated, pointing to the dangers posed to school-aged children, noting the increase in child hospitalizations.

In the chat room at the meeting, one teacher commented, "Dead teachers don't collect oversize classroom pay." Another wrote, "NO ONE should be required to teach in a classroom without windows," while a third stated simply, "LOA is too soon with Delta Variant raging!!"

A DPS teacher working in the summer school program told the *World Socialist Web Site* that summer school teachers are already in classes with 60 students as a result of another teacher calling in sick.

There was a separate LOA for teachers who want to teach remotely at the Detroit Virtual School (DVS). The Agreement starts with the caveat, "A Virtual School Program will be offered if fully funded and authorized (in terms of FTE's) under the State School Aid Act." This opens the door for the deliberate starving of funds for the program in order to quash it entirely.

The DVS LOA places limits on the number of special education and vocational students and teachers that can attend the virtual school, while the school year and school day "mirrors" the traditional school for both teachers and students.

For those who seek to continue learning and teaching safely via remote learning, the process to become eligible for DVS is designed to be as inconvenient and unpleasant as possible. The selection process is complex and requires applicants to provide proven health and family concerns.

Rather than allow these teachers to work from home, the DPS is forcing them to go to brick-and-mortar buildings to then teach remotely. Finally, a teacher's return to his or her previous position or school is not guaranteed; they can apply for a transfer and will go where they are certified to teach at the district's discretion.

The nationwide mania to reopen schools was summed up last week by Brian Deese, the top economic advisor to President Joe Biden. Deese told *Yahoo ! Finance* last week that one of the primary factors behind the "labor shortage" has been a lack of "child care and school, particularly for parents of school-aged kids." He added, "That's why this has been such a focus of the administration, the president, providing the resources to actually get schools open safely, get childcare centers open safely."

The political establishment in Detroit, the heart of the American auto industry, is determined to reopen schools in order to pressure parents back to work. The school reopening campaign in Detroit and across the US coincides with the ending of the federal moratorium on evictions this Saturday, July 31, and the cutoff of federal unemployment benefits on September 6, placing huge pressures on parents to send their children back to school and return to work themselves or face homelessness and starvation.

One Detroit teacher told the WSWS, "As a veteran teacher with many of my parents who work in the auto industry, I know that the cuts in welfare have handed these women on a silver platter over to the corporations as a low paid workforce."

The district and the union, headed by Terrence Martin, who is also an American Federation of Teachers vice president, are acutely aware of the extreme level of anger and unrest among Detroit teachers.

This extremely restive group of teachers fought in 2015-16 against the charterization of schools and atrocious conditions in school buildings. All of the same issues that forced those walkouts remain in place today, under far-advanced conditions brought on by the pandemic. Teachers continue to report classrooms without windows, windows that do not open, lack of air conditioning in the hot months and heat in the cold months, lack of hot water for hand washing and overcrowded classrooms.

In order to resist the drive to fully open schools, educators must build their own rank-and-file committees so that the opposition of teachers can find a voice. We urge all Detroit educators to sign up today to join and help build the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed last year to unite teachers in Detroit and throughout the state with autoworkers, health care workers, and others in a unified struggle to save lives over profits. Contact us today to get involved.

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