

# Faculty members and supporters at Youngstown State University protest to demand CDC protocols be implemented

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On August 13, about 50 faculty and their supporters gathered to protest the unsafe reopening of Youngstown State University (YSU) in Ohio. The protest was held as it became apparent that the administration would not require the roughly 11,000 students returning to campus on August 30 to follow basic COVID-19 safety measures, such as mandatory vaccinations, social distancing or masking.

The demonstrators gathered in front Todd Hall on YSU's campus and chanted "Mandate masks in your class!" Many in attendance also held signs expressing their support for masking and a scientific approach to the pandemic.

The protest took place amid the rapid reopening of schools and universities across the United States, even as the more contagious and deadly Delta variant of COVID-19 has continued to spread. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 82 out of 88 counties in Ohio are currently experiencing high levels of COVID-19 transmission. In Mahoning County, where YSU is located, less than half the residents have even received one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and throughout Ohio less than half the population is fully vaccinated.

Last month Republican Governor Mike DeWine specified that he would not issue a mandate to require students to wear masks. The failure by the governor to issue a mask mandate, which alone is inadequate to stop the spread of COVID-19 within schools, will allow for the virus to spread freely throughout the population after many schools reopen later this month.

Given the relative low-level of vaccinations and reports of vaccinated individuals being able to spread COVID-19 to unvaccinated people, the reopening of

Ohio universities poses a definite danger even with public health guidelines being enforced. However, YSU has opted to pursue a particularly egregious policy even compared to other schools within the University System of Ohio. Kent State University and Ohio State University both announced that students would be required to wear masks indoors.

The university has also been criticized in the media after it emerged that officials in charge of COVID-19 safety protocols, such as Julie Gentile, had multiple social media posts flagged by Facebook for containing "partly false information." Gentile, who is YSU's Director of Environment Occupational Health and Safety, shared information associated largely with right-wing conspiracy theories such as false claims that the drug ivermectin can prevent COVID-19.

Under these conditions the Youngstown State University Ohio Education Association (YSU-OEA), which negotiates the contract for over 300 faculty members at the university, called the protests to demand the university follow the CDC guidelines.

Prior to the demonstration, Dr. Mark Vopat, a spokesperson for the YSU-OEA, told the WKBN 27, "People who are vaccinated can contract the virus, they can spread it to others. There are instances of long-COVID, for people who are vaccinated and get COVID. We also have several faculty members who have young children, so even if they don't get sick, if they're immunized, they can still take it home to their kids."

In a separate statement, the YSU-OEA has also noted that the administration's COVID-19 mitigation strategy is based on the CDC's 2015 "Hierarchy of Controls" document, meaning the safety protocols are based on

pre-COVID guidelines.

Officials from the YSU-OEA have complained that they were not consulted prior to the decision by the university to not follow the current CDC guidelines. According to the YSU-OEA, they were not allowed to participate in a meeting between Youngstown City Health Commissioner Erin Bishop and the university administration, which was held just prior to the August 13 protest.

However, the issue of masking is being used as a cover by the unions for the fact that they are supporting the drive by the Biden administration for the reopening of schools and universities under conditions where the highly contagious Delta variant is raging uncontrolled.

For its part, YSU administration has sought to provide a thin veneer of democracy to the lack of safety guidelines by sending out a survey to staff and students to nominally get their input on the university's protocols. As of the day of the protest, administrators reported roughly 2,600 responses to the survey.

Administrators have also stated that they are "engaged in continuous review of... COVID-19 protocols and in making adjustments when necessary."

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

Noticeably absent from the statements by the YSU-OEA has been any explanation as to why the recent contract does not include any guarantee of enforcement of COVID-19 safety guidelines. The current contract came following a three-day strike last October, which was abruptly concluded with the announcement of a tentative agreement.

Under the terms of the recent contract, the YSU-OEA and administration each hold three seats on an Academic Workplace Environment and Safety Task Force, with a seventh seat being held by a member of YSU student government. The task force, however, only has the ability to appeal to the administration for changes.

The lack of emphasis on workplace safety amid a deadly global pandemic was not an oversight by YSU-OEA, but an intentional policy pursued by the unions

as part of their support for Biden's candidacy. As a result, the National Education Association (NEA), with which the Ohio Education Association is affiliated, hailed the Biden administration last month as part of their annual Representative Assembly.

The hailing of Biden by the NEA and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) reflects their support for the rapid unsafe reopening of in-person classes, which was one of Biden's immediate goals after assuming office. The NEA and AFT have since failed to mobilize educators across the US against the unsafe reopening of schools this fall, including elementary schools where most students would be too young to receive any of the approved COVID-19 vaccines.

As a result of the rapid reopening without even minimal safety guidelines, many teachers and parents have begun to organize demonstrations to demand mandatory mask mandates in schools. Over the last month there have already been protests among parents in Cobb County in Georgia, Miami-Dade County in Florida and among teachers and parents in Houston, Texas.

It is clear that educators, parents and students will not remain passive in the face of the rapidly spreading new variant of the virus. However, they face the necessity of mobilizing independently from the unions, which have fully supported the unsafe reopenings in the midst of a deadly pandemic. In order to carry this struggle forward the WSWS encourages educators in Ohio to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and become active in the Pennsylvania-Maryland-Ohio Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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