

# Teachers, parents angered over reopening of Michigan schools

Phyllis Steele  
29 August 2021

Last week, the public health officials in Michigan's two most populous counties—Wayne and Oakland—issued emergency orders requiring everyone in pre-K-12 schools over 4-years-old to wear a face covering whatever their vaccination status. Wayne County is home to Detroit and has a population of 1.7 million. Neighboring Oakland County has 1.2 million residents.

The emergency orders were issued as COVID infections rise sharply in Michigan and across the US and warnings by scientists that opening schools amid a surge of the more infectious Delta variant will lead to a spike in illness and death, including among children under 12 who are not eligible for vaccinations.

Case rates in the state are up more than 1,000 percent since June 22, the day Governor Gretchen Whitmer rolled back the remaining statewide pandemic orders, according to a review Sunday of state data by the *Detroit Free Press*. The test positivity rate is up more than 600 percent over the same timeframe, and hospitalizations are up 175 percent.

As of August 29, 1.05 million state residents were diagnosed with COVID-19 and 21,509 have died. According to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the average number of new confirmed cases was 2,163 per day last week with a seven-day average of 13 deaths.

Governor Whitmer has ignored a recommendation from her chief medical officer for a statewide mask requirement for students. Instead, the Democratic governor said she was “hopeful” other schools would adopt masking guidelines. Only about a third of school districts have mandates in place, the *Detroit News* said.

By not issuing a mandate, the governor bowed to the right-wing campaign by state Republicans and Republican-backed groups like “Unlock Michigan.” These forces have organized small and provocative protests to oppose masking and vaccinations, to which the media has given outsized coverage.

Last July, the Republican-controlled state House of Representative voted 60-48 to repeal the 1945 law giving governors the power to declare an emergency and authorize

mandates to protect the public during the emergency. The Michigan Republicans—who encouraged and collaborated with fascistic militias that plotted to kidnap and murder Whitmer—are opposed to the slightest public health measures to save lives.

The promotion of mask mandates, as necessary as they are, will not stop the explosion of infections and deaths resulting from the reopening of schools. In fact, the debate over masking becomes a cover for the implementation of this murderous policy, which is backed by both corporate-controlled parties.

As one parent posted on a Facebook forum, “Even with Oakland County’s mandate in place, I’m feeling very apprehensive about sending my kids to in-person tomorrow. They’re not old enough to be vaccinated.” She noted that she had children with learning disabilities “who do so much better in a school setting” but “they’re also immune compromised. I’ve been sick to my stomach all day because of sending them to school tomorrow.”

In Detroit, the Democratic Party-led school board and the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) have signed a “letter of agreement” to open the schools on September 7 for 53,000 students and more than 4,000 teachers and school employees. The deal is filled with vague language, including “principals will adhere to social distancing standards” to “the greatest extent possible” and inadequate and unenforceable three-foot social distancing guidelines, which will be undermined by large class sizes.

Finally, the letter of agreement includes the setting up of a “Committee for School Reopenings,” made up of district and union officials, who are all committed to “fully reopen all schools with immediacy.”

At a meeting called by the Detroit Federation of Teachers Sunday night, attended by thousands of teachers, educators denounced the union’s efforts to bribe teachers with meager pay raises to get them back into schools, which are dangerous for educators, students and their communities.

One worker posted, “There were COVID outbreaks throughout the district last year and staff members were not

informed. This lack of communication increases our chances of getting and/or spreading Covid. Who is responsible for informing the staff on COVID outbreaks? What is the turnaround time for teachers to be notified? Why aren't the doctors and scientists employed by the district informing us?"

Another teacher posted, "I have 27 students on my roster. I'm already over the proposed contractual limit. ... Students will continue to enroll, and my student number will further increase ... My understanding is school administrators were told if the teacher can fit the desk in their classroom, then we would have to take them."

A member of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee said, "This is being rushed through, and the content of the tentative agreement make it imperative that we vote no. Regarding the pay, if I'm dead the pay increase means nothing. The DFT and the district have agreed to open schools, but we did not agree with this. The Delta variant is producing a record number of child hospitalizations. Michigan's case rates are up 1000 percent since June. How many students and teachers are we willing to see die? There is no amount of wishful thinking that will make COVID go away, it is still a global pandemic. So, we need to protect our children, protect our lives," she said, urging teachers to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

DFT President Terrence Martin and Vice President Lokia Wilson responded by denouncing any suggestion that there should be collective action to stop the opening of schools. "We're not encouraging, asking or implying anything such as a work stoppage or a strike," Wilson said, adding that the school superintendent and Michigan authorities would impose "serious repercussions, such as termination," for a teacher walkout.

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.

"If you feel that strongly about not reporting to work because of COVID then again, make your own decision," she said, "but the DFT is not endorsing or embracing anything like that. There is no work stoppage. There is no strike. And there will be serious repercussions for anyone who engages in those behaviors."

Martin said, "The local is sending out a message to all our members tonight that we fully expect members to turn up for work tomorrow, the rest of the week and the rest of the school year. We are not supporting a work stoppage or any sort of work action. We have to protect ourselves as a local."

The DFT, like its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, is doing everything to prevent a rebellion of educators and parents against the homicidal back-to-school policy led by the Biden administration and both corporate controlled parties.

A statement by the *WSWS Educator s Newsletter* urged Detroit teachers to reject the contract and to make preparations for collective strike action to prevent the reopening of schools to save lives. It noted, "After spending decades cutting school funding and privatizing education, the Democrats and Republicans are hypocritically feigning concern about the emotional and academic well-being of our children. If they were really concerned, they would not be playing Russian roulette with their lives. And what about the emotional impact on children who see their classmates, teachers, parents and grandparents die from COVID-19?"

The only reason the Democrats and Republicans want schools open is so that corporations can get workers back on the job to produce profits. This is of particular concern to the auto manufacturers, including Ford, which is complaining that 20 percent of its workforce is off work on any given day due to health concerns and lack of child care.

As explained by Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz of the University of Calgary during the *World Socialist Web Site* online forum last Sunday, the virus could have been successfully eliminated within 37 days during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020 through the application of aggressive public health measures. Even now, such emergency action, Dr. Gasperowicz said, can eradicate the virus within two months.

This requires a fight to close schools and all non-essential production, ensure income for all affected workers and small business owners, and implement a public health policy of universal testing, contact tracing, masking and social distancing, combined with a vast expansion of vaccinations in the US and globally.

This struggle will not be carried out by the DFT or any other unions, which are led by corrupt business officials impervious to the lives of their members, but by workers and the committees they build. We urge all Detroit teachers, school employees and parents to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to take up this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**