

“There’s a lot of wishful thinking but not enough scientific thinking”

University of Michigan lecturers threaten strike as opposition grows to full resumption of in-person classes

Matthew Brennan, Sam Wayne
29 August 2021

As the deadly COVID-19 Delta infections surge across the country, the University of Michigan (U-M) is opening its Ann Arbor and Flint campuses today to near-capacity in-person classes. Its Dearborn campus resumes in-person classes this Wednesday. All three campuses enroll over 44,000 undergraduate and over 18,000 graduate students and employ several thousand more educators, staff and administrators.

This reckless decision to move to in-person learning at U-M comes as the country now exceeds over 150,000 daily infections and over 1,200 deaths per day. These numbers will continue to increase now that all schools are opening across the country. Largely unvaccinated children are the most vulnerable population of this growing wave of infection.

The move to in-person policies is provoking growing opposition and concern on the campuses. Faculty at University of Michigan have been circulating an online petition that raises concerns over the reopening, citing a growing body of scientific evidence that shows current mitigation protocols will not suffice to protect lives on campus. The petition has so far received nearly 700 signatures from graduate students, lecturers and staff.

In addition, over 1,600 lecturers with the Lecturers Employee Organization (LEO) union at the three campuses picketed in Ann Arbor over the weekend to protest poor pay and working conditions. The lecturers, who teach approximately 60 percent of the undergraduate courses at Flint and Dearborn and 40 percent at Ann Arbor, may go on strike as early as September 5 over poor pay and working conditions.

Faculty and staff with the two main educators unions at neighboring Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti also issued a joint statement about the increasingly unsafe conditions on the campus as they reopen this week as well. “We are particularly concerned for members who are immunocompromised or have children who can’t yet be vaccinated. Many of our members agreed to teach in-person courses in very different circumstances.”

The U-M petition emphasizes, among other things, that the national public health situation is rapidly deteriorating:

“In Michigan, more than 900 people are currently hospitalized with COVID-19, a 68% increase from two weeks ago. Breakthrough cases

in fully vaccinated individuals are increasing. The now-dominant Delta strain is far more infectious than the original Alpha strain. The onslaught of cases is increasing at Michigan Medicine, even before students return to Ann Arbor from all over the country and from abroad. ICU occupancy at Michigan Medicine, as of 8/23/2021, is 86%, with 38 COVID patients and only 18 beds available.

“Of particular concern is growing evidence that one cannot rely on vaccination alone to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Three recent CDC studies indicate together that 1) protection is waning; and 2) vaccines have a current estimated effectiveness of 55% against all infections (symptomatic and asymptomatic). While these vaccines reduce the likelihood of serious illness, hospitalization, and death, scientists are only beginning to understand the long-term impact of infection, even on asymptomatic individuals.”

The petition also insists that the university’s mandate protocols are insufficient, notes that the university has no metrics in place for even shifting to virtual learning in a crisis, and has fundamentally eliminated any meaningful social distancing in buildings and events, including the resumption of full-capacity football at the 107,000-seat Michigan Stadium.

Rebekah Modrak, a professor in the Stamps School of Art & Design and one of the organizers of the U-M online petition, told the WSWS: “For my part, instructors in my school were asked to submit exemptions for in-person Fall 2021 teaching back in April. Many instructors submitted exemptions to teach virtually, citing documented medical conditions and/or unvaccinated children in their home. Almost all the exemptions were declined. These refusals will put individual faculty at risk of infection, and they also place undue burden and stress on faculty who are caregivers (especially women), despite the fact that we’ve developed innovative online pedagogy that enables us to teach effectively while virtual.

“The University of Michigan does have a mask mandate and a vaccine mandate. But this isn’t enough. Although the Delta variant is rapidly spreading, and vaccine potency is waning, the fall semester will begin on Monday with high occupancy classrooms that do not allow for six feet, or even three feet in some instances, of social distancing. There seems to be a lot of wishful thinking and not enough scientific and democratic thinking.”

Cindee, a lecturer in Biology, also spoke to the WWS on the picket line in Ann Arbor. She explained that lecturers face a double burden in often having to teach at several campuses a semester in order to make a normal salary. This undoubtedly will increase the risk of unnecessary exposure in classrooms as well. She mentioned that lecturers who cannot get half-time employment generally do not qualify for health insurance either. “For lecturers at Dearborn and Flint, it is often even more difficult. And across all three campuses childcare is a major issue, and the university has not helped to alleviate this difficulty.”

When asked about the dangers of COVID-19, Cindee replied: “We’re very nervous. There are mandates, but there is just so much we don’t know. They really don’t address anything outside of the campus. There might be high vaccination rates on campus in Ann Arbor, but we don’t know about the surrounding community where we all live, and of course the children can’t get vaccinated at all. We are seeing reports that less than 40 percent of the students are vaccinated at Flint.”

Thomas, a lecturer in composition at Dearborn said, “I’m hoping we don’t have to strike, and the university sees us as valid educators. But we’re not sure, so that’s why we’re out today.”

When asked about the dangers of COVID, Thomas explained: “This will be the first time I am back in a classroom since March of 2020. I’m a little uneasy because I’m not sure what’s going to happen. And even with vaccines, it doesn’t seem totally safe. Also, I have two grandkids who aren’t vaccinated, and I’d probably rather see them stay home.”

At University of Michigan, faculty and students have been pushed into reopening with no serious discussion or debate. University President Mark Schlissel issued an August 25 letter to the campus acknowledging growing fears but attempted to give the illusion that there is no serious risk to students and faculty since a majority on campus will be vaccinated. “In other words, *breakthrough infections do occur, but they are significantly less frequent among fully vaccinated individuals, and illness is much less severe.*” [Schlissel’s emphasis]

This a dangerous lie, an attempt to sow complacency among faculty, staff and students about the disease and new mutations, which could become resistant to current vaccines.

U-M is recognized as a premier university reputed for its achievements in scientific research, and yet, since the beginning of the pandemic, the response to the pandemic has always subordinated science and social need to profit interests. Instead of educating students on the dangers of the Delta variant, the university is focused on downplaying the threat underscored by university president Mark Schlissel’s recent statement that campus life this fall will be “much closer to 2019 than it will be to 2020.”

The fact that not even a forum for discussing an elimination approach to the virus is available for students, staff and faculty reflects the domination of powerful political and corporate interests over science, democracy and human lives at the institution. The university’s Board of Regents is a virtual who’s who of Wall Street, Pentagon, financial, real estate and health insurance interests. Six of the eight members of the Board of Regents are also members of the Democratic Party.

One of the most significant factors in the reopening of University of Michigan is that it is in line with the policy of both big-business parties and the trade unions. Rather than opposing the deadly reopening, the AFT and NEA, which falsely claim to represent nearly

5 million educators and staff, are aggressively campaigning for it.

AFT President Randi Weingarten is currently on a 20-state “Back to School for All” tour to push for fully in-person instruction. The AFT has sent \$5 million to union locals to campaign for students to return to the classroom.

Students, faculty, and staff must embrace a program based on a scientific understanding of the current situation of the pandemic. The fight to defend the social right to health and safety during the pandemic cannot be restricted to a “campus issue.”

Such an outlook will retread the same path that led to the defeat of the Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO) during the fall 2020 semester. Although the graduate student workers took a courageous stand and saw support from students and workers across the campus, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) was able to shut down the strike, and the key demands around COVID-19 safety measures were defeated.

While the call for greater safety protocols by faculty and the hundreds of petition signers is welcome, anything less than a call for full elimination of the virus will not resolve the dangers educators and students face. Rather than mitigation, it is critical that students and educators insist upon an elimination and eradication approach to the pandemic.

Such an approach would involve deploying every proven measure to combat COVID-19 in order to eradicate the virus once and for all. The university’s mitigation policy, like that of the Biden administration currently, is content with allowing the pandemic to rage on, infecting people.

As epidemiologist Michael Baker explained, “we cannot vaccinate our way out of the pandemic.” What is needed is a combination of vaccinations with broad public health measures such as lockdowns, universal testing and contact tracing.

In an August 22 presentation at a WWS global online forum, Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz demonstrated that emergency, coordinated action at the start of the pandemic could have successfully eliminated the virus in a relatively short period of time. Her data showed that, even without vaccines, aggressive public health measures—lockdowns, travel restrictions, universal testing and contact tracing, and the isolation of infected individuals—could have brought new cases to zero in 37 days. If such measures had been implemented in early 2020, the global death toll would be measured in the thousands, not millions.

The WWS *Educator Newsletter* urges lecturers, support staff and students to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee to mobilize the working class against the homicidal back-to-school policy and to save lives.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact