

Students and teachers walk out at Detroit high school over COVID-19 policies

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Students and teachers at Martin Luther King High School in Detroit walked out of class on Wednesday to protest the administration's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The walkout began at noon and lasted for 20 minutes. Students and teachers said that the number of COVID-19 cases were being underreported, that social distancing was a failed policy, and there is no deep cleaning being done at the school.

Students reported that at least seven teachers and many students had been infected with the virus and were staying home from school in recent days amid a surge in cases throughout the city and state of Michigan.

Detroit public school teacher Kat told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the students led the walkout at King High School because they are "fed up with the lack of information" adding, "Every principal at each school is doing something different. They aren't telling the truth about the cases. Everything is hush-hush."

Kat said, "The teachers decided to stand behind the students today."

Teachers have been meeting over Facebook and taking votes to call in sick to demand a change in policy. There have been votes of 97 percent in favor of sickouts at multiple schools, and on Monday and Tuesday of this week there were 40 or 50 teachers that called in sick.

Kat continued, "Teachers are fed up and ready to walk. The buildings aren't being cleaned. Now they are going virtual for the next three Fridays to clean the buildings. But at my school last Tuesday we had absolutely no heat. At Diane Banks School the toilets are backing up.

"People are afraid for their lives. Living with death is not acceptable."

The decision of the school district to move classes online on Friday is an attempt to divert growing anger among teachers and students. It will have no effect on the spread of the virus, which is airborne and is not transmitted primarily on surfaces.

The *Detroit Free Press* spoke with Lyferra Turner, a tenth grader at King High School, who participated in the walkout. Ms. Turner said, "You come out and protest, you have to be strong, especially for what you feel like is your safety."

Although the school is reporting zero cases for the week, Ms. Turner said many of her teachers were not in school due to COVID-19 infections.

King High School students have been circulating a petition calling for the removal of school principal Damian Perry for a long list of reasons, among them his failure to accurately report COVID-19 cases each day and his refusal to shut down the school to protect the health of students.

The *Free Press* also spoke with the mother of a student from Detroit's Cass Technical High School who said that she is receiving constant notifications about new cases at her son's school. Melissa Redman called for the school to be shut down at least temporarily. "The numbers are still too high," she said. "For me, one student is enough because you can't pinpoint everywhere that student went."

On Wednesday, Detroit's Renaissance High School also announced that it was closing and returning to online learning in response to a coronavirus outbreak. The shutdown will be in effect through the Thanksgiving holidays.

The seven-day average number of COVID-19 cases in Michigan on Wednesday was 7,353, the highest number since the start of the pandemic 20 months ago, surpassing the previous record of 7,270 set one year

ago during the deadly third wave of the health crisis.

Along with increasing case counts, the number of deaths in Detroit and in 77 of Michigan's 83 counties is climbing also. On Wednesday, state health officials reported 242 additional deaths from the virus since Monday.

The pandemic is surging among young people in Michigan, with 201,000 cases confirmed in people aged 19 and younger, and more than 450 children under the age of 12 are becoming infected with the virus each day.

Meanwhile, at the University of Michigan, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is investigating a "large and sudden" outbreak of the flu among students. The university reported on Monday that there have been 528 cases of the flu, with 77 percent affecting students on campus, since October.

Detroit Federation of Teachers President Terrence Martin, who has opposed any organized opposition to the reopening of the schools by teachers and parents, responded to the walkout by emphasizing the importance of "cleanliness and sanitation of school buildings." However, cleaning school buildings with outdated ventilation systems during the coronavirus pandemic is meaningless when the pandemic is spreading through the air and into the respiratory systems of teachers, students and school staff members.

The return to in-school learning in Detroit and other districts throughout the state followed the lifting of all COVID-19 restrictions—including any restrictions on gatherings, at restaurants and bars and removing any mask mandates—by Democratic Party Governor Gretchen Whitmer on June 22.

On August 10, Michigan's Board of Education approved a resolution that allowed local school districts to make "scientifically informed decisions" about whether to require masks for students, teachers and visitors.

The walkout at Martin Luther King High School is the first in the US this fall and is part of broad-based and growing opposition among parents, teachers and students to the policy of returning to school while the pandemic continues to spread.

The school walkout follows the #SchoolStrike2021 protests organized by Lisa Diaz and supported globally, including in Michigan, on October 1 and 15. Like the beginning of the pandemic—when auto workers in

Detroit sparked a movement to shut down nonessential industry against the insistence by employers that everyone stay on the job—the working class must take matters into its own hands to defeat the pandemic.

Teachers and students in Michigan should mobilize and demand the immediate and complete shutdown of schools to in-person learning, combined with the provision of resources and income to parents to allow them to take care of their children while they are home. The continuation of in-person learning amidst the massive spike in cases guarantees a further spike in infections and death.

To organize this fight, the *World Socialist Web Site* calls on teachers, students and parents to form rank-and-file committees at each school and in the neighborhoods.



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