Shut down Michigan schools to in-person learning! Stop the winter of death!

Statement of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE)
19 November 2021

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) call for the immediate shutdown of schools and in-person learning in Michigan, now a major epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Every day schools remain open means countless thousands of new infections of children, teachers, parents and the community as a whole. The impact of the school reopening policy is measured in lives, along with the still little understood but severe consequences of Long COVID.

There is a growing movement of teachers and students to demand safe learning conditions. This week, students and teachers walked out at Martin Luther King High School in Detroit. Teachers are discussing sick-outs and other actions to demand a change in policy. This opposition must be organized and armed with scientific understanding and a program to stop the pandemic and save lives!

More than 8,000 people now test positive for COVID-19 every day in Michigan. That's the highest rate ever—higher than the peak of the first big surge last winter, and higher than the peak of the most recent surge in March-April-May.

In addition to being bigger and earlier than last winter's surge, this one takes place under the dominance of the Delta variant, the most contagious variant yet, which is producing a growing number of "breakthrough" infections in those who are fully vaccinated. Immunity is also waning for the vast majority of the population who have not received the critical third dose of the vaccine.

Week after week, K-12 schools are the source of *more than half* of all recorded COVID-19 outbreaks in the state of Michigan, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. This week, 86 outbreaks took place at schools, with another 16 outbreaks at daycares and youth sports, out of 162 total. In the last month, pediatric hospitalizations for COVID-19 have doubled in Michigan.

This is shocking but not surprising. It is well-understood by scientists that schools, like factories and other poorly ventilated workplaces, are ideal environments for spreading SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

COVID-19 spreads—to an even larger degree than through droplets—by becoming "aerosolized" into tiny particles which hang in the air for minutes or even hours after they are exhaled.

With a variant as contagious as Delta, Michigan's classrooms have become cesspools of infection, even where masks are mandated and vaccinations are widespread. COVID-19 is coming home with children, teachers, and staff members, and from there out into the community and the world, where it is mutating into even more dangerous variants.

But fortunately for humanity, all viruses share one major weakness: they die if they cannot constantly spread from one host to another. Every time Michigan has completely stopped in-person learning, either for planned seasonal breaks or in the face of a surge, it has resulted in a dramatic reduction of COVID-19 cases statewide.

Leading scientists have made clear that, by vaccinating individuals and reducing social interaction to a minimum, even very contagious viruses like the Delta variant can be totally eliminated in a matter of months.

In a desperate attempt to keep Michigan's largest

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school district open in the center of the auto industry, Detroit Schools Superintendent Nikolai Vitti has announced the district will go virtual for one day a week, Friday, only for the month of December.

Vitti must take teachers, parents and students for fools. Since the Delta variant can be transmitted from person to person in just seconds, and all the same people will continue to gather in the same rooms and buildings with the same poor ventilation, but now for 28 hours a week instead of 35, this will have no effect on the spread of the virus.

The fight against the pandemic requires the immediate closure of schools and non-essential workplaces, and, to facilitate this, the immediate expenditure of billions of dollars, not only to fund high-speed Internet access and high-quality remote learning for all students, but also, crucially, to pay parents and all non-essential workers to stay safely at home until the virus has been eliminated.

Instead, a second Winter of Death has been prepared, based on the ridiculous lie that closing schools and workplaces would be "a cure worse than the disease."

One of the main forms of this lie is the argument that living with mass death and infection is somehow to be measured against the danger of "learning loss" or negative psychological impact from children missing out on the social interactions of a normal school day. As though being surrounded by death and illness are conditions in which children could possibly thrive!

To fight for an end to the pandemic requires the organization of workers, students and parents independently of the two big business parties and the trade unions. In Michigan and Detroit, the homicidal policy of keeping schools and non-essential production open as the pandemic spreads uncontrollably is being implemented by the Democratic Party.

The Democrats' policy of vaccination and inadequate mitigation measures, promoted by the Biden administration, is, in the end, merely a variant of the Republican Party's "herd immunity" strategy of promoting mass infection. Both parties reject the measures that scientists insist are necessary to stop the pandemic. Both subordinate lives to private profit and the wealth of the ruling class.

For the ruling class, keeping schools open is essential to keeping workers on the job, in increasingly unsafe factories and workplaces which are themselves centers for the spread of the pandemic.

As for the Detroit Federation of Teachers and other unions, they have played the critical role in forcing students, teachers and workers to accept mass death as a daily occurrence. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten even toured the US this summer under the banner of "back to school for all."

An end to the pandemic cannot be achieved in Michigan alone. This requires a national and global strategy, combining vaccination and other mitigations with aggressive public health measures, including the complete shutdown of schools and non-essential production. A coordinated and systematic campaign to stop the transmission can put an end to the pandemic in a matter of months and save countless lives.

Determined action here in Michigan, however, will resonate throughout the country and around the world. The schools must closed to in-person learning! Lives must be placed above profits!

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the IYSSE are fighting to mobilize educators, students and the entire working class to fight for this policy. Join us, to build the leadership that can bring the pandemic to an end. *To join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, text (313) 409-8083, email educators@wsws.org or fill out the form below. To join the IYSSE, click here.*

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