

“Having us in person is all about getting parents back to work to make other people money”

## Detroit teachers organize sickouts to demand school safety and Covid protections

Jerry White  
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Teachers and support staff at The School at Marygrove (TSM), a public school in Detroit, are engaging in a sickout to demand improved safety measures after the Oxford school shootings, and virtual-only classes to protect educators, 330 students and their families from COVID-19.

The protest in Detroit is part of the growing resistance of educators in the US and internationally, including the one-day strike by 50,000 New South Wales teachers in Australia on Monday.

The job action, which began Monday morning independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), was triggered by the refusal of school authorities to provide basic security measures, like classroom door locks, largely due to the rushed and haphazard construction project in northwestern Detroit. TSM is being expanded into a K-12 school and teaching college on the campus of the former Catholic college, which closed in 2019.

But the educators’ sense of vulnerability to another tragic school shooting has only heightened their concern and anger over the criminal policy of keeping in-person instruction going as COVID-19 spreads throughout schools in Detroit and Michigan. The sickout at TSM follows the November 17 walkout by students and teachers at Martin Luther King High School, on the city’s east side, after an outbreak at the school.

On Monday, the protesting TSM educators issued an open letter outlining their grievances and demands to Detroit Public Schools Community District Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, the school board, the Barton Malow construction firm and the co-sponsors of the “social justice” and science and technology-based school, including the Kresge Foundation and the University of Michigan.

Pointing to the “rising COVID infection rates in our local community, the minimal action taken to date, and the recent school shooting at Oxford High School,” the educators demand that “those responsible for our creation and maintenance ... remedy our concerns regarding the health and safety issues that persist in our school community.”

The letter notes that the inability of teachers to lock their classroom doors, the lack of a school-wide lockdown system and few if any security guards have left the staff “unprotected and in harm’s way daily.” It continues, “In addition to these security

concerns, we are also worried about the significant increase of COVID cases and hospitalizations. Winter weather and the holiday season have arrived, meaning an increase in close contacts. COVID infection rates are climbing in Michigan and in our own district and hospitalizations are up in Wayne County. In our own school, which comparatively has done a fantastic job containing the virus, our infection and quarantine rates are growing exponentially. Parents, staff, and students are rightly concerned.”

The lack of adequate staffing, the letter continues, is “forcing us to increase our class sizes to unsafe numbers,” the letter continues. In addition, staff were “literally rushed into an unfinished building at the beginning of this year,” and smaller rooms due to construction delays on appropriately sized classrooms were “preventing us from maintaining safe distance.”

In addition to putting locks on classroom doors and issuing keys to enable administrators to lock outside doors and installing a new PA system, the letter outlines a series of critical demands to protect educators, students and the community from the further spread of the virus.

These include: “Sufficient and proper PPE, including N-95 masks,” daily cleaning and sanitizing of classrooms and bathrooms, “weekly student COVID-19 testing for all unvaccinated students,” contact tracing with the full participation of teachers who may have been in close contact with an infected student and “clear metrics in place for determining when COVID risk is high enough to keep schools virtual, or, conversely, when it is safe to return to school in person.” Until these issues are completely addressed, the letter says, the school should “go to 100% percent virtual learning,” adding, “Our community’s health and safety are paramount.”

In a discussion with the *World Socialist Web Site*, one of the teachers leading the TSM protest said, “We are frustrated because all our concerns have been ignored. Our school has been under construction since 2019. It is supposed to be a school for social justice and STEM, with partners like the Kresge Foundation, Starfish and Bart Malow. They are all pointing the finger at each other, but our concerns are not being addressed. We have five doors that can’t lock, others that are falling off the hinges, and some that have locks and no keys. It is not secure, it’s open 24

hours a day. We've been trying to endure, but the Oxford shooting made it clear it was so unsafe. After the shooting happens, our principal asks School Superintendent Vitti to let us go virtual and he denies it and says go to work."

She continued, "COVID has everybody scared. Because of the ongoing construction, rooms are not big enough and not ventilated. We have one teacher who was vaccinated and got COVID. She knows she got it at school because she has a new baby and doesn't go anywhere else. They docked her days from her sick bank instead of giving her paid time off because she was infected.

"Students are worried about COVID, but they don't want to wear masks anymore, thinking maybe they're invincible. They don't keep three feet apart. I have a swimming noodle that's three feet and I'm constantly sticking it between the kids to show them. We know at least three kids who have been infected, but only one has been documented. There are others who should be quarantined, but the way the district determines this is a fraud. If you're vaccinated, no quarantine. If you say you had a mask on, no quarantine. You're supposed to ask a sick kid, 'Was your mask up all the time?' Of course, they'll say yes because they don't want to get in trouble."

Michigan continues to be the epicenter of the new surge of deadly virus in the United States. Although it has half the population, Michigan trails only New York for the highest number of average daily infections, with 8,566 compared to New York's 9,363. Michigan has the highest number of hospitalized COVID patients (4,504) and hospitalizations per 100,000 people (45), up 24 percent over the last 14 days. The state also leads the nation in the daily average number of deaths (119.7) and deaths per 100,000 residents (1.20).

According to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services report released Monday, 46 schools in Michigan had new outbreaks of COVID-19 and 454 schools had ongoing outbreaks.

Ongoing outbreaks in Detroit include: Burns Elementary (10 students and educators), Ronald Brown Academy (18 students and educators), Catherine Blackwell pre-school/elementary (7 students) and Cass Technical (38 both), Martin Luther King (25 both), Detroit Collegiate Preparatory at Northwestern (9 students) and Renaissance (44 students) high schools.

Michigan is the center of the US auto industry. The political authorities, from the Biden administration down to the local level, along with their servants in the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and their state and local affiliates, are determined to keep schools open and parents producing profits in equally dangerous workplaces.

The walkout at Martin Luther King and threats of teacher sickouts across the city forced district officials to extend the Thanksgiving holiday and close schools for a week. But the district's 53,000 students and more than 5,000 teachers and support staff were sent back into schools on November 29.

In a maneuver concocted with the Detroit Federation of Teachers to counter growing demands to close school buildings, Superintendent Vitti announced that there would be "virtual Fridays" throughout the month of December to "deep clean" the schools. This move, which is entirely for show, will do nothing to stop new outbreaks of COVID-19, which is primarily transmitted

through airborne particles that will continue to spread Monday through Thursday.

"We want to teach our kids, do our jobs," the veteran teacher at TSM told the WSWs. "But the safest way is to go virtual. We've tried to let the district handle this in-house before going to the media. But each day that passes, it gets more dangerous. Now we are taking it to the people just like the sickouts in 2016 over dirty and unsafe conditions in the schools."

The action, she said, was taken independently of the teacher unions. "The educators have done this on our own. [American Federation of Teachers President Randi] Weingarten sold us out long ago, just like [DFT president] Terrence Martin. We have little hope that any of those entities will help us. We started this without them."

She continued, "I was born and raised in Detroit. Our neighborhoods got bombed out, and despite all this talk about revitalization, all you see is the great disparities between workers and the affluent. Who is making all this money by sending folks back to work during a pandemic?

"They want kids in the schools so their parents go back to menial jobs for terrible pay. That makes the multi-millionaires even richer. Having us in person is all about getting parents back to work to make other people money. Because of this greedy action, there are new variants, the virus can mutate inside of bodies, and you don't know what you are going to get, except it could be more lethal. We have to shut down the schools and go virtual."

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee is leading the fight for the immediate shutdown of schools and non-essential workplaces as part of employing a complete array of public health measures to stop the spread and eliminate COVID-19. The committee is supporting the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

A veteran teacher in Detroit and a leader of the Michigan rank-and-file committee said, "The Oxford shooting made teachers realize the district doesn't care about our lives. We welcome the action taken by the educators at The School at Marygrove and call on teachers throughout the city and state to join the fight to close the schools and save lives. We can't mitigate this virus with half measures. We urge all educators to join our committee to link up our struggles to finally eliminate this deadly disease."



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