

Michigan teachers discuss collective action to close schools

Jerry White
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Michigan teachers took part in an emergency meeting Tuesday afternoon to organize collective action to close schools and stop the spread of COVID-19. The meeting, sponsored by the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, included a large number of educators, parents and young people from Detroit and other Michigan school districts, as well as teachers from Illinois, Pennsylvania and New York. Also participating was a leader of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in the United Kingdom, where 218,000 new COVID-19 infections were recorded Tuesday.

The emergency meeting was held as the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reported that the state saw 61,235 new cases and 298 deaths between last Thursday and Monday. The seven-day average of 12,929 daily cases was a record and up 87 percent from the previous week. In its first report of 2022, the DHHS reported that 3,999 Michigan residents were hospitalized with COVID-19. This includes 96 children, the highest number since the pandemic began.

K-12 schools continue to be the largest source of COVID-19 outbreaks in the state, with 22 new outbreaks and 333 continued outbreaks traced to classrooms, according to a new report posted Monday. As bad as this is, the full impact of the travel and family gatherings over the holidays has not yet been felt.

In opening Tuesday's meeting, *World Socialist Web Site* reporter Zac Corrigan reviewed the explosive spread of the Omicron variant, which the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington predicts could cause three billion infections around the world over the next three months, including one million cases a day in the United States.

Pointing to the recent decision by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to reduce the number of quarantine days from 10 to five, Corrigan said the Biden administration had abandoned any pretense of stopping the spread of the pandemic and had fully adopted the homicidal "herd immunity policy."

He made clear that Michigan's Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, has made no secret that keeping schools open is key to keeping workers on the job and producing profits. This includes the auto industry, where large numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths have led to labor shortages. Corrigan cited the Michigan state government's website on school policy, which declared, "Without schools, our economy can't function at full capacity. Parents rely on schools to provide safe places for children to learn and thrive so that they may go to work."

While the website states, "Nothing can replace the value of placing our trained, talented educators in a room with students," Whitmer just signed a Republican-backed bill that allows districts to use school bus drivers, cafeteria workers and other non-teaching staff to replace sick teachers so schools can be kept open. "So much for the claims by the politicians that they are concerned about the academic and emotional well-being of children," Corrigan stated.

He explained that the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee was completely independent of the unions, which are collaborating with the Biden administration to keep the schools open. The committee, Corrigan said, was demanding the closure of all schools and non-essential business, the allocation of billions of dollars for remote learning and to compensate workers and small business owners affected by the temporary closures, and the deployment of the full arsenal of public health measures, including universal testing, contact tracing, quarantining and mass vaccinations, in order to cut off the chain of viral transmission and eliminate COVID-19.

His remarks were followed by the comments of Phyllis Steele, a Detroit teacher and chair of the committee, who denounced the lie that children were virtually unaffected by COVID-19. She pointed to the recent deaths of five children in the state, which brought the total to 39 since the outbreak of the pandemic, along with 196 cases of the devastating Multi-System Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C).

Facing the prospects of mass absenteeism and fearing an expansion of opposition, which began before the holiday

break with protests by Detroit high school students and sickouts by teachers, Detroit Public Schools Community District officials announced Monday that the state's largest district would shift to virtual learning through January 14. Announcing the decision, DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti cited Detroit's test positivity rate of 40 percent. School employees—who must be vaccinated by February 18—have a positivity rate of nearly 20 percent, district officials reported.

Several other Michigan districts, including Pontiac, Flint, Lansing, Hamtramck and Harper Woods, are temporarily going to remote learning, while schools in Southfield, just north of Detroit, will remain closed until next week.

These moves, Steele said, were aimed at “mitigating” the anger of educators, parents and students. State and union officials, she said, “were far more worried about a contagion of teacher sickouts and strikes spreading across the state and the country than the deadly impact of COVID-19.” But that was exactly what was needed to close the schools and save lives.

A report was also given on the situation facing Chicago teachers, who voted by a margin of 73 percent Tuesday night to demand remote-only classes starting on Wednesday.

WSWS reporter Kristina Betinis said district officials planned to cancel all classes and essentially lock out the teachers for engaging in a supposed “illegal strike.” Teachers and parents, she said, “will not find leadership in the Chicago Teachers Union,” which betrayed a similar struggle last winter and collaborated with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to reopen the schools. Betinis concluded, “What is needed is a society-wide political strike to unite educators with all workers to close the schools and non-essential businesses and save lives.”

During the discussion, a Detroit teacher who was involved in a sickout at The School at Marygrove early last month and is active in the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee commented, “I am impressed by this organized and data-driven meeting. You can stand up and do something. We felt physically unsafe after the Oxford high school shootings and because of the spread of COVID. We organized outside of our union and carried out a sickout. We organized in Zoom meetings and outlined our demands for safety protections and virtual learning. They did not meet all our demands, but almost the whole staff called in sick and we showed educators can stand up and fight. Sickouts and other job actions now had to be spread across the district and the state.”

A teacher from the Howell school district in Livingston County, west of Detroit, said that she and many other educators and students were suffering from COVID-19 infections. Right-wing groups, she noted, “were claiming that COVID is fake, and vaccines were filled with

microchips. Two epidemiologists from the county health department quit because they wouldn't say that getting infected is like getting protected by a magical force field, so we could all play together.”

She added, “Teachers are speaking out against this, but the union is telling us not to talk out.” She said that she and other teachers were seeking to organize sickouts to demand mask mandates and remote learning.

A teacher from Brooklyn, New York and a member of the New York Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee said educators had been hoping for changes with the election of the new mayor Eric Adams. “But instead, we got the absolute opposite. He claims the schools are the ‘safest places for kids to be’ and that they have to stay open.”

District officials, she said, had essentially dropped their “mitigation theater.” There is “no social distancing, students are shoulder-to-shoulder and classes are as big as ever. My building has no ventilation, and I was given an inefficient air purifier and told to keep the windows open—when it's 20 degrees outside!”

She added, “The mayor's lies about the schools being the safest places are based on the inadequate testing. Students need to get permission from parents to be tested. In my school only 10 out of 300 got permission and the same ones have been tested again and again. Teachers are outraged. We get no leadership from the union. So, we have decided to take measures into our own hands and call a sickout.”

A teacher from Philadelphia and member of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee said teachers at his school organized a sickout and forced the closure of the school before Christmas after the tragic death of 17-year-old student Alayna Thatcher from COVID-19.

Commenting on the action, a parent and member of the Pennsylvania committee said, “What happened in Philadelphia showed that teachers must take the initiative and organize rank-and-file committees in your school or workplace. These committees have to be independent, and they have to be worker-led. Political strikes must be focused against the profit system and for life,” he concluded.

Summing up the meeting, Zac Corrigan called on educators to join and build the growing network of national and international educators rank-and-file committees and to provide evidence to the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic.



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