

Thousands of students and faculty take a stand against the University of Michigan's return to in-person learning

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6 January 2022

To join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee to close the schools and end the pandemic, visit wsws.org/edsafety.

Thousands of students and staff are once again taking a stand at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor against the school's reckless decision to reopen for in-person classes on Wednesday. The decision to reopen the campus comes in the face of skyrocketing local infections and hospitalizations from the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

According to the *New York Times*, Michigan recorded a seven-day average case count of 13,412 on January 4, a record high for the state. Washtenaw County, which includes Ann Arbor, also saw a dramatic rise in weekly cases through the last two months, and positive COVID-19 cases at the university are currently at their highest since February 2021.

Medical staff and health officials are warning that the local hospitals are nearing capacity.

Under these conditions, on January 3, two days before classes were set to begin in-person, over 500 faculty and graduate student instructors attended an all-instructors meeting held online to discuss an initiative called the “e-pivot,” a transition to online instruction in opposition to the university's forced return to in-person classes. Close to 600 participants and other supporters pledged to make the pivot to online instruction in their classes.

The meeting follows the publication of an open letter to President Schlissel and Provost Susan Collins on December 17, which argues for a two-week delay of in-person instruction. As of Wednesday morning, the letter had been signed by 1,520 faculty, students and staff.

The letter begins: “We write to urge the University of Michigan administration to reconsider our plans for the winter semester. It seems clear that bringing students, faculty, and staff back to campus directly after a week of holiday activities that typically include numerous gatherings of friends and relatives and often take place in crowded venues is a recipe for a major COVID outbreak in the first week or two of classes.

“What is critical,” the letter continues, “is to act now and not wait until a last-minute decision is forced upon us by circumstances.”

The Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), the graduate instructors union at the university, held an emergency general membership meeting Tuesday where the instructors voted by 95

percent to endorse a motion to support the “e-pivot.” GEO and members of the faculty hosted a press conference via Zoom on Wednesday to announce they would be taking matters into their own hands.

Graduate students at UM have been at the forefront of the struggle against in-person learning. In 2020, student instructors—with wide support from undergraduates, lecturers, faculty, staff and university workers—launched a strike to demand the universal right to work remotely during the pandemic, improved testing and contact tracing, care subsidies for parents and caregivers, a \$2,500 unconditional emergency grant, rent freezes and the demilitarization of the university campus.

The strike was ultimately strangled by the GEO parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in collaboration with the University administration, which ruthlessly threatened the students with legal repercussions if they continued the strike.

Merely a week after the strike was shut down, outbreaks began to erupt on campus. Less than two months later, the administration was forced to temporarily move to online learning.

Now, nearly two years into the pandemic, and with overwhelming scientific evidence proving that classrooms are major sources of community spread, the university is seeking to once again force students and staff back into unsafe classrooms.

One of the leading voices of the opposition, Professor Rebekah Modrak of the Stamps School of Art and Design at UM, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the situation on campus. Modrak explained that “the objective of the letter is to support instructors who choose to temporarily shift to virtual for two weeks for their own safety and the safety of the community, as well as to address other challenges.”

Modrak went on to explain the immense difficulties students and faculty are facing this semester as a consequence of the pandemic:

The thousands of canceled flights are preventing some students from returning to campus. Others are reporting the need to isolate until they've been tested. A shift to virtual would allow all students access to education in these conditions. Seventy-six percent of the faculty polled told us that the letter would only need 500 or fewer signatures for

them to feel enough solidarity to make the shift to virtual. We are confident that we've achieved that objective. Of course, even better would be if the University of Michigan administration were to officially shift us all to virtual for two weeks.

Asked for her response to University of Michigan President Mark Schlissel's claim that the administration does not believe "that an initial period of remote education will significantly diminish spread of COVID-19," Modrak responded, "One of our two local hospitals is at 87 percent capacity, and the other is at 99 percent capacity, so it's extremely important we not continue to over-stress these resources."

Modrak went on to explain that President Schlissel's message "overlooks several other challenges" beyond "diminished spread." For example, "Ann Arbor Public Schools will be virtual until January 10th. How does he expect instructors with young children in virtual school to be in two places simultaneously? These instructors/parents have no choice but to work from home."

Students and faculty at the University of Michigan have taken a courageous stand. In fighting against the unsafe reopening of campus, they are fighting for the health and safety not only of themselves but for the community as a whole.

Their actions are part of a growing movement of educators throughout the country to demand the shutdown of schools as the COVID-19 pandemic surges out of control. Chicago Public Schools teachers voted overwhelmingly Tuesday night to stop the reopening of schools after winter break. The teachers have come under vicious attack from the Democratic Party-led administration in Chicago.

However, in order for their fight to be successful, important lessons must be drawn from both the experience of the 2020 Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) strike, as well as the entire experience of the working class since the start of the pandemic.

First, the demands made by students and workers must not be directed by what they think the administration might allow but by what scientists insist is necessary to save lives and end the pandemic. Contrary to the many statements from school administrators seeking to shift the blame of the outbreaks onto students, the conditions in classrooms, student dormitories and even off-campus housing are simply not conducive to proper social distancing.

A two-week delay to in-person learning will do little to curb the threats posed by the Omicron variant and other potential variants of the virus. The demand must be raised for the complete shutdown of the schools to in-person learning, along with the shutdown of nonessential production, as part of a broader strategy to eliminate the virus.

Second, the campaign for a safe campus must be conducted as a broader campaign encompassing all schools and workplaces throughout the country. COVID-19 does not respect the boundaries of any campus, workplace, state or country. In order to make one campus safe, policies must be coordinated on a national and international scale.

Finally, workers and youth must understand who their allies and enemies are in this struggle. Hundreds of college, university and K-12 campuses throughout the US are once again emerging as central battlegrounds in the fight to contain the pandemic.

Teachers, students, faculty and staff stand on one side of the barricades, fighting for an end to the reckless policies of in-person learning, for resources to be allocated for safety measures and online learning, and for policies based on science, that put lives over profit. They must turn out to broader sections of the working class, facing unsafe conditions in workplaces and factories where the virus is also spreading without restraint.

On the other side of this fight stand the university administrations, the corporate-controlled trade unions and both the Democrats and Republicans.

The Biden administration has abandoned any pretense of stopping the spread of the pandemic and has instead fully adopted the homicidal "herd immunity policy," first spearheaded by the Trump administration, which advocates for letting the virus spread uncontrollably regardless of the carnage it leaves behind. School administrations around the country are kowtowing to the pressure from the White House and pushing the lie that schools are not a significant source of transmission.

For the fight against the pandemic to go forward, workers need their own organizations of struggle, independent of both parties and the corrupt trade union apparatus. Throughout the US such organizations have already begun developing. On Tuesday, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee held an emergency meeting to organize collective action to close schools.

The WSWs urges all those faculty, staff and students at the University of Michigan who are engaged in the struggle to end in-person learning to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.

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