

The way forward for University of Michigan faculty and students in the fight against the pandemic

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (US)
7 January 2022

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) encourages high school youth to contact us today to share the conditions in your school and to get involved in the fight against the pandemic.

Thousands of students, staff and faculty at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor are once again engaged in a courageous struggle to close the campus for in-person learning and save lives. Their fight is in direct opposition to the administration’s reckless decision to reopen for in-person classes on Wednesday, which comes in the face of skyrocketing local infections and hospitalizations from the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

Over 1,500 students and faculty have signed an open letter to President Mark Schlissel and Provost Susan Collins published on December 17 calling for a two-week delay to in-person learning. More than 1,600 have signed an additional letter committing faculty to an “e-pivot.” According to the “e-pivot,” faculty will hold their classes online, despite the university’s in-person policy.

The response from the university administration thus far has been to move full steam ahead with the reopening plans. UM President Schlissel has defended the plans using the same talking points and lies being pushed at the highest levels of the political establishment, most ferociously by the White House itself.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) welcomes and supports the stand taken by graduate students and faculty. However, for students, staff and faculty to carry out a successful struggle to save lives, their demands 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.

In this regard, one must clearly state the facts and lies about COVID-19 and schools.

First, throughout the pandemic, every experience in reopening schools, along with every credible scientific study, has proven that classrooms and dorm rooms are major vectors of COVID-19 spread. They are not safe for in-person learning.

Days before the reopening of campus, Schlissel issued a

statement to the UM community stating that “our classrooms, with required vaccination and masking, have remained safe throughout the pandemic.” To justify the reopening of K-12 schools, Biden falsely stated on December 21, “Children are as safe in school as they are anywhere.”

The reality is that *in nearly every case*, towns and cities with colleges that reopened for in-person learning in 2020 and 2021, or that, for one reason or another, allowed large numbers of students to return to their dorms quickly become some of the worst hot spots in the country.

Following the fall 2020 semester, the *New York Times* published an analysis of more than 200 counties with substantial college student populations. According to the data, the overall COVID-19 deaths rose faster in these counties than elsewhere in the country. In fact, deaths in those counties doubled since the end of August, compared with a 58 percent increase elsewhere. Now, faced with an even more infectious variant, school administrations around the country are again forcing teachers and students back into unsafe classrooms.

As for Schlissel’s claim about the record of the University of Michigan, 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 along with other measures to save lives in the fall of 2020. The strike was ultimately strangled by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in collaboration with the university administration.

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 because of the sheer volume of cases.

The second major argument pushed by the Democratic Party–led campaign to reopen the schools has been that young people are largely immune from the virus, particularly if they are vaccinated. While it is true that young people are less likely to become severely ill or die from the disease, they are not immune, and the Omicron variant has led to a surge of “breakthrough” infections among all age groups.

In fact, at this very moment, more young people are

hospitalized from this particular variant than at any point in the pandemic thus far. According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data, a record number of youth aged 18–29 are currently hospitalized, standing at a seven-day average of 1,433 new patients.

The sheer volume of infections is leading to a near collapse of hospitals throughout the country, and Michigan is no exception.

The University of Michigan Health System announced on Thursday that 500 members of its staff are currently out with COVID-19, leading to the cancellation of surgeries and bed shortages. Last week, Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit reported that 700 of its staff members were out with COVID-19, leading to a reduction of 97 available beds for patients. Michigan’s largest hospital system, Beaumont, warned Thursday that it had reached a “breaking point.”

COVID-19, moreover, does not respect the boundaries of any campus, workplace, state or country. Students and faculty will catch the virus, and they will bring it home to their unvaccinated children or their elderly parents who will become sick.

The reopening of colleges and universities in Michigan, and around the country, will lead to more hospitalizations and more deaths. With the hospitals becoming even more strained, people will die from otherwise treatable emergencies and illnesses.

There is no doubt that the impulse motivating students and faculty to take a stand is principled and correct. However, the reality is that the demand for 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.

Moreover, the fight cannot be contained to the University of Michigan campus alone. The pandemic is a global problem requiring a global solution. The fight at the University of Michigan must be part of a widespread campaign for the complete shutdown of all schools to in-person learning, along with the shutdown of nonessential production, as part of a broader strategy to eliminate the virus.

The IYSSE calls on faculty, graduate workers, staff, and students and the University of Michigan to turn to the working class as a whole to fight for a new policy to stop the pandemic. The basic principles of this strategy were outlined in a December 30 open letter to workers from the Socialist Equality Party:

- The present policy of “herd immunity”—i.e., allowing COVID-19 to spread throughout the population—must be repudiated. A new strategy, directed toward the elimination and eradication of SARS-CoV-2 must be adopted.

- The policies implemented to stop viral transmission must be determined by the needs of public health. The protection of human life and safety must take absolute and unconditional priority over all corporate–financial interests. The costs of fighting the pandemic—including the payment of wages and salaries, compensation to small business owners, full medical

coverage for the ill, and payments to bereaved families—must be borne by corporations and a 100 percent tax on the windfall pandemic profits obtained by large investors through the run-up in the stock market.

- The fight against the pandemic must be conducted on a global scale. The pandemic cannot be stopped unless SARS-CoV-2 is eliminated in all countries. American workers must demand that vaccines be provided in necessary quantities, free of charge, to their class brothers and sisters in the less-developed countries.

In raising the necessary demands to end the pandemic, workers and youth will come into conflict with all those forces who support in one way or another the interests of big business and capital. It is critical that workers understand who their allies and enemies are in this struggle.

Since coming to office, the Biden administration and state governments, regardless of whether they are controlled by Democrats or Republicans, have refused to take any measures that may undermine corporate interests. These forces have been supported at every move by the trade unions, which, in the case of teachers, have shut down every attempt at closing the schools.

The real allies of teachers, staff and students at the University of Michigan are workers and youth across all industries who face the same homicidal policies in their workplaces.

We urge students to join the growing movement of educators, autoworkers, service industry workers and others throughout the country who are demanding a rational approach to end the pandemic. This includes Chicago Public School teachers who voted overwhelmingly Tuesday night to stop the reopening of schools after winter break.

All faculty, staff and students at the University of Michigan who are engaged in the struggle to end in-person learning and want to join this ongoing movement of the working class should join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, and if you are an educator, to get involved in the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee today.

To join the IYSSE, click here. To contact the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, visit wsws.org/edsafety.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact