

“It’s hard not to think that the university’s tactic is that everyone get Covid.”

University of Michigan instructors and students denounce reckless in-person teaching

Matthew Brennan
10 January 2022

The IYSSE at University of Michigan is calling for an emergency meeting this Wednesday, January 12 at 7 p.m., held jointly with the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, “Stop in-person learning to save lives!” To register and attend the meeting, [click here](#).

As COVID-19 infections skyrocket across the University of Michigan (UM) campus and health facilities, opposition is growing to the administration’s reckless and potentially deadly return of students and instructors to in-person learning.

UM President Mark Schlissel announced in December that the university would keep its January 5th Winter Semester reopening with full in-person learning—despite a nationwide surge of Omicron infections, currently averaging over 670,000 cases and 1,550 deaths per day.

This profit-driven decision, following the lead of the Biden administration and the interests of Wall Street, has been met with a powerful show of opposition at the university. A faculty open letter to Schlissel and Provost Susan Collins issued on December 17 called for a delay to in-person learning. It has since been signed by over 1,550 students, instructors and staff members.

The administration refused to change its policy. Instead, Schlissel issued a December 28 letter that insisted classrooms “have remained safe throughout the pandemic.” The letter stated that “we do not believe that an initial period of remote education will significantly diminish spread of COVID-19.”

In response, faculty and graduate student instructors issued another open letter on January 3 calling for and pledging to participate in an “e-pivot” away from the university’s in-person policy, in which instructors would hold their classes online for at least two weeks. This letter has now been signed by over 1,900 students, graduate

student instructors, and faculty.

Writers of the *World Socialist Web Site* and members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UM have been reaching out to instructors and students at University of Michigan, including those who signed the open letters against in-person learning.

One graduate student who signed an open letter wrote, “Today, one class had our cohort get together ... so that we could listen to a presenter who spoke to us via Zoom. We risked COVID exposure so that we could listen to a Zoom call, within the School of Public Health!”

She continued “I am personally terrified every time I go to an in-person lecture, which makes it much harder to focus. It is astonishing to me that we are required to attend classes in person under grade penalties during these conditions, with no choice or option to participate remotely unless we are already ill. Given the record high cases of COVID-19, it is my personal stance that the University of Michigan should act consistently with many other schools in our region, close all in-person campus learning at this time, and resume in-person learning only if/when it is safe to do so.”

The student noted that her cohort classmates conducted a poll, and 75 out of 83 students wanted a hybrid-virtual or entirely virtual class model. “It is ridiculous that this decision has purportedly been made for the students’ benefit when the vast majority of students do not want to be forced to attend in person during record high COVID-19 transmission.”

On Friday, three days into the semester, the university’s COVID-19 dashboard reported a record high 815 infections for the week. The previous week, when students were returning to campus, the dashboard had reported 676 positive cases.

Also on Friday, officials at the University of Michigan Health System reported that more than 500 members of its staff are currently COVID positive, and that over 200 surgeries had been postponed in December due to staffing and bed shortages.

Another graduate student instructor wrote, “I wholeheartedly support a switch to virtual learning... We’ve crossed multiple benchmarks nationwide for covid cases/data that the medical officer said would be grounds to shift plans. With the lack of quarantine housing for off campus students, inconsistencies in information, and lack of action, it’s hard not to think that the university’s tactic is that *everyone* get covid, risking countless lives.”

She also felt strongly that a fight must be conducted to protect students and staff on campus, “We have to be reactive now, unfortunately, but I will support motions to mitigate disease spread and keep our community safe. We have the tools to do it, so why aren’t we?”

An engineering student commented, “I am 100% in support of closing campuses to in person learning to stop the spread of omicron.” Another graduate student in the Department of Public Health wrote, “I just want to say that I fully support going fully online.”

A professor in the Department of Romance Languages wrote, “I indeed support the [open] letter and the initiatives by many constituencies in the university to make our campus safe for everyone, beyond financial or economic criteria/interests.”

Responding to a question as to why she had supported the open letter, a lecturer from the Dearborn campus commented “My concerns are as follows: Omicron is highly transmissible. Cases are currently at all-time highs during the pandemic. I had a breakthrough case of COVID last August and am not interested in having another breakthrough case. I don’t want students to be in a position of being exposed by attending in person classes, thus contracting a breakthrough case and spreading it to vulnerable family members.”

Most students share rooms and housing with other students, meaning the infections are undoubtedly spreading rapidly. The university reported that quarantine housing for those infected was at 35 percent capacity by the second day of the semester. But many students on Twitter and the popular “r/uofm” Reddit page have been issuing posts indicating that quarantine housing was already full in many facilities.

“My friend who also tested positive was told by UHS [University Health Service] that they had a backlog of ~360 students still waiting to be put into isolation housing

... and its only day 1,” read one post.

The decision to return students, staff and lecturers to in-person at University of Michigan is part of a national Democratic Party-led campaign to reopen schools and businesses in order to defend corporate profits and the stock market above human lives and public health.

Schlissel’s claim that the administration is “prioritizing student learning, the pedagogical needs of our academic programs, and the enriching classroom interactions” is an outright lie. The impact of exposing students and instructors needlessly to mass infections, including long-COVID and potential deaths, will not “enrich” anything, except the school’s profit margins.

The thousands of students and instructors who signed the open letters—openly defying the university’s reckless push for in-person learning—must be supported. But their principled initiative must also be broadened and linked up with all sections of educators, staff and service workers and students in similar struggles.

Chicago Public School educators remain locked out of online classrooms by Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot after they courageously refused to return to in-person classrooms. Walkouts, sickouts and wildcat strikes have been initiated in Oakland, San Francisco and Seattle school districts. Thousands of high school students in Massachusetts and New York are signing petitions and planning walkouts if schools don’t move to online learning.

In order to build an opposition that will sustain a fight to protect lives, educators and students must develop a political strategy to eliminate and eradicate the virus, based on the most advanced scientific knowledge and public health measures.

The IYSSE at University of Michigan is calling an emergency meeting this Wednesday, January 12 at 7 p.m., held jointly with the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. We encourage all instructors, students and workers to attend and share their insight and thoughts on how to develop this strategy in the coming days and weeks.

To register and attend the meeting, click here.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact