Michigan educators and students: Join the fight to close schools and stop the pandemic!

Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
17 January 2022

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) held a joint meeting with the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at the University of Michigan and the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on January 12. Following the meeting, which was attended by educators, parents and students in Michigan and Illinois, the MERFSC adopted the following statement.

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on teachers, students and parents throughout the state to demand an immediate halt to all in-person learning to protect the health and safety of educators, our students and communities.

Like other states, the spread of the Omicron variant in Michigan is completely out of control. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, another 251 state residents died on Thursday and Friday and 37,114 more were infected. Hospitals are filling to capacity, with 84 percent of ICU beds filled. A federal emergency medical team has been sent to Henry Ford Hospital in Wyandotte to assist understaffed and exhausted medical workers.

The supposedly "mild" variant has put at least 140 children in the hospital with confirmed or suspected infections.

Tragically, we lost Omeka Bradford, a 17-year-old Kalamazoo Central High School student, on January 11 after a nearly two-month battle with COVID. The committee sends our deepest condolences to the family and friends of Omeka for your terrible loss. We pledge to redouble our efforts to mobilize educators, parents and students to prevent these unnecessary deaths and protect other children from long-term disabilities associated with this horrific virus.

"We have not seen the worst, I fear," Michigan's chief medical officer Dr. Natasha Bagdasarian said last week, pointing to research predicting "we will peak by the end of January, maybe early February." Even if this is the case, it would not be the end of the pandemic. "There will be variants after Omicron," Bagdasarian said. "The more the virus spreads, the more it makes mistakes and mutations, and we don't know what those mutations will look like and how it will affect how the virus behaves."

Data from Michigan, the US and the world demonstrates that schools are one of the chief vectors for the airborne transmission of this deadly disease. Last week, there were 203 ongoing outbreaks at schools across Michigan, compared to 162 at nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.

The number of infections in Michigan are almost double what they were in November 2020, when schools were closed. It is utter madness to keep them open now! But that is exactly what Governor Whitmer and state and local officials from both big business parties are doing.

Kalamazoo and most other districts in the state have kept children in overcrowded and poorly ventilated classrooms. On January 18, Lansing and Grand Rapids schools will fully reopen, along with most Ann Arbor schools.

Some 50,000 students in Detroit will return to in-person classes as early as January 24, after the state's largest district was forced to go remote because of a test positivity rate of 40 percent and sickness affecting one out of five school employees. Flint schools are also set to reopen on January 24.

Despite the demands of thousands of students and faculty members, the University of Michigan is continuing in-person classes, while students at Michigan State University and Eastern Michigan University remain online for another one or two weeks.

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The decision to open schools is driven not by science but the economic interests of powerful corporations, including the auto industry. This was spelled out on the state government's own website, 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." But neither the schools nor the factories—where thousands of workers are off sick—are "safe."

The Biden administration has abandoned any pretense of fighting to stop the pandemic. Instead, it has fully embraced "herd immunity," the anti-scientific theory that the pandemic will simply burn itself out after it runs out of people to infect. The outcome of such a horrific experiment, however, would be the infection of the entire population, millions of more deaths worldwide and the potential for life-long debilities for an entire generation of children.

While the political establishment is implementing a policy of mass infection, across the country and internationally, educators, parents and students are demanding the closure of schools. In Chicago, 25,000 teachers carried out a four-day job action to demand virtual learning in the nation's third-largest district. Their struggle was sabotaged by the Chicago Teachers Union, which accepted a deal with Mayor Lori Lightfoot that would only close individual schools if 30-40 percent of the staff or students were out sick!

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee insists that life must take precedence over profit! We denounce the deal of death signed by the CTU and encourage Chicago educators to join our sister committee, the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

No sooner had the CTU signed this miserable deal when thousands of Chicago students walked out to demand remote-only instruction. They joined a nationwide wave of student walkouts to protect lives, including in New York City, Boston, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Oakland, San Francisco and Los Angeles, California; Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; and Okemos, Michigan. Underscoring the global character of this struggle, three-quarters of all French teachers conducted a nationwide strike for COVID safety last week.

This is the real voice of working people and youth, that the news media, big business politicians and corrupt unions will not be able to silence. But we need fighting organizations to unite educators and all sections of workers who want to temporarily close all schools and non-essential businesses, as part of a public health policy aimed at eliminating COVID-19 once and for all.

Our committee demands:

• Close all schools and nonessential businesses until the transmission of the virus is stopped and rank-and-file educator committees, working with principled scientists and public health experts, determine that the schools are safe enough to reopen. During the temporary closures—which scientists say would last no more than two or three months—full income protection must be provided to all workers and small-business owners.

• Pour billions of dollars into remote learning. Guarantee free, high-quality computers and internet connections and the resources for families to ensure children have a quiet, comfortable place to study and to provide for the nutritional and medical needs of every child.

• Hire thousands of public health workers to conduct universal testing, contact tracing, quarantining and education on vaccines and the use of masks to protect against airborne transmissions.

• The resources for these life-saving measures are available. Reverse the billions of dollars in tax cuts to the auto companies, healthcare giants and other big businesses, and sharply increase the taxes on the billionaires and mega-billionaires whose fortunes have skyrocketed during the pandemic.

It is necessary for educators, students, parents and all workers to take matters into our own hands and fight to protect life, not profit. If you agree with this, we urge you to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.

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