

“There’s no way to social distance, the hallways are clogged full like sardines”

Hundreds of students walk out across Manitoba to protest unsafe schools

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Hundreds of students at up to 90 schools across the Canadian province of Manitoba walked out of class Monday to protest the dangerous conditions created by the government’s insistence on a return to in-person learning at the peak of the Omicron wave of COVID-19.

The protest was organized by MB Students for Covid Safety, a grassroots group set up by high school students concerned about the lack of safety measures to protect them and their teachers from the potentially deadly virus.

The demands being advanced by the students are an option to enroll in remote learning along with the provision of N95 masks and rapid antigen tests. They are also calling for students to be given immediate access to booster shots and the right to be notified when there is a case reported in their school. “We just want to be able to go to school without getting sick or spreading the virus,” Eniola, a student involved in running the MB Students for Covid Safety Instagram account, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Ava, a 15-year-old student from Kelvin High School in Winnipeg, one of the initiators of the walkout, was inspired by similar walkouts that took place a week ago in New York. Students at Grant Park High School and College Louis Riel have also been instrumental in organizing the walkout.

Protesters explained that they decided to take action in the face of the refusal of the Progressive Conservative provincial government to do anything to safeguard students and education staff from infection. “Everyday of winter break we were waiting for

restrictions and they never came,” Piper, a student from Grant Park High School, told the WSWS.

“Hallways are terrible, especially during class change,” Eniola added. “The lack of resources provided plus taking away contact tracing is looking like it’ll create some school outbreaks sooner or later (probably sooner). You can sort of feel people’s frustrations.” Eniola stated on the removal of contact tracing, “There wasn’t any justification for why they got rid of it. It was one way that we were keeping ourselves protected.”

Asked about conditions at their school, Eniola said, “Conditions are stressful. Most classes are 30-35 organized into group seating of four to a table or in rows with students seated side by side in pairs.

“Most schools have thousands of students, there’s no way to social distance, the hallways are clogged full like sardines. My school has one hallway where all the paths intersect. Last year, we at least had cluster systems, where we were split into three different clusters.”

Manitoba is currently facing its worst wave of the pandemic so far. Deaths per 100,000 of the population stand at 4.0 in Manitoba, second only to Quebec at 4.6 over the past week. In terms of hospitalization, Manitoba is currently leading the country, with 44.5 hospitalizations per 100,000. The Canadian average is 27.2. Hospitals are collapsing under the weight of the Omicron surge. As with other provinces and territories across the country, health care in Manitoba has been neglected for decades in favour of tax cuts for the wealthy. Health care worker burnout has also been a

major issue.

The student walkout is an initial response to the disastrous handling of the pandemic by the PC government led by Premier Heather Stefanson. A recent Angus Reid poll showed that Stefanson has a 21 percent approval rating, the lowest for any premier in Canada.

Under these conditions, the student protest won widespread support. “There has been so much support, so many other high school students reaching out,” Piper told the WSWS. “Even students as young as 9 years old have reached out! ‘I am an elementary student can I still do this?’”

Many teachers expressed their support for the student walkout on the r/Winnipeg subreddit. Typical comments included “I’m a teacher and I’m with you 100%!” and “I hope the teachers walk with them!” Some comments noted that binding arbitration prevents the teachers from striking in support of the students, prompting a poster to comment, “but a wildcat strike would be very effective. Teachers hold so much economic power right now, and if they showed solidarity they would see results. The province doesn’t run without them, and together, they’re irreplaceable.”

Education Minister Cliff Cullen sought without success last week to urge the students to “have a second thought” about a walkout. He referred to the impact of remote learning on the mental health of students to justify reopening the schools.

Piper dismissed this claim. “One of the most common lines from the government is that it (online learning) will affect our mental health badly and that we should be in school because we need the socialization and all that,” Piper said. “Our mental health isn’t as affected by not being in schools as by the uncertainty of living in a global pandemic.”

Turning to the decision to reopen after the winter break, Piper added, “The thing that is the most annoying is that the government didn’t even really look, things were getting worse. Two days after our week at home the government went ‘you’re going back to school.’”

The government’s policy of prioritizing corporate profits over the protection of human life, which has been enforced by governments at every level across Canada from the Trudeau Liberals on down, also came in for condemnation from the student protesters. “The

focus is on the economy not on health and safety,” said Piper. “But people getting sick is also going to have an impact on the economy. ...When you look at governments its very, very rare that you see someone there who isn’t rich.”

Asked if they had a message for students and education workers fighting the reopening of unsafe schools across Canada and internationally, Eniola replied, “Stand up for what you believe in, what you feel is safe. If you do not feel safe in a situation where you should, take action.” Piper added, “Make your voice heard!”

We encourage all students looking for a way to oppose the murderous reopening of schools across Canada to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, which seeks to arm young workers and students with a socialist program to oppose the ruling class’ disastrous handling of the pandemic. We also appeal to students to attend the next public meeting of the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) on January 23 at 1 p.m. Eastern. [Click here to register.](#)

The CERSC is fighting for the establishment of rank-and-file safety committees in every school, university and college, to organize mass strikes to halt in-person learning and fight for a global program of COVID-19 elimination. We pledge to do all we can to assist educators and school support staff to build such committees and encourage everyone wishing to take up this urgent fight to contact us today by emailing the CERSC at cersc.csppb@gmail.com or visiting our Twitter or Facebook accounts.



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