

# Graduate students at University of Oregon walk out for safe working conditions

**Claude Delphian**  
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University of Oregon (UO) graduate workers, students and community members held a rally outside of Johnson Hall on Tuesday in support of the graduate student union to demand measures to protect students and staff from COVID-19.

The Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (GTFF) graduate student union has issued 18 “demands for a safer UO” which are divided into four categories: increasing remote instruction options, improving in-person protections against COVID-19, providing transparent public data about positive COVID-19 cases and allowing workers and students to participate in decision-making.

The GTFF demands include that UO move all courses to remote learning until Lane County cases decrease to CDC-defined low transmission levels, which is 50 cases per 100,000 people. The GTFF also wants the option for teachers and students to use remote learning if they feel unsafe resuming in-person instruction. Graduate teachers are also calling for the elimination of a requirement that instruction be simultaneously given in-person and via live broadcast such as Zoom.

Tali Bitton, GTFF’s vice president for organizing, said that teaching simultaneously in person and via broadcast is difficult for graduate teachers because they haven’t received training or resources for doing so. He said, “In the end, it’s not really fair to the students.”

This walkout comes as students and teachers globally are staging walkouts in protest of unsafe pandemic practices on their campuses. On the same day as the UO walkout, several students walked out of Grant High School in Portland, Oregon, telling KATU News that their campus is overcrowded and mask mandates are not being followed or enforced.

Calliope Ruskin, a student at GHS, said, “We need to be able to access our classrooms safely, and there is no

way for me to be able to social distance from other people. My mom is immunocompromised, there is no way to protect myself at school.” GHS students echo GTFF’s demands when they are calling for mandatory N95 or KN95 masks for everyone and for more COVID-19 testing.

Students at Franklin High School in Seattle, Washington, walked out last Friday calling for similar increased safety measures such as remote learning, N95 masks for all, weekly testing, contact tracing, vaccines and boosters and daily updates to the district’s COVID-19 dashboard. FHS has the highest infection rate in its district according to the Seattle Public Schools COVID-19 Dashboard, which is surely undercounted due to overwhelmed testing sites throughout the city.

A student at Kamiak High School in Mukilteo, north of Seattle, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. “At school, we’ve had children test positive in the library. It’s unfair quite honestly. When we look at the chart for COVID cases in our county, we’ve had up to 3 times more COVID cases compared to the initial outbreak when we went into lockdown. The numbers are growing, and our measly precautions are not preventing sickness. Human life should be above all.”

Students across the US, in cities like Chicago and Boston, have joined the movement for the closure of unsafe schools and other safety measures for protection against COVID-19. There is broad support for these actions as the Omicron variant rips through schools and workplaces nearly unhindered.

The Biden Administration’s “herd immunity” policy is a policy of mass infection and death that is provoking widespread militancy of teachers and students across the US. The Democratic Party has wholly embraced this policy of social murder, relying on token gestures

and vaccines to cover for the consequences of their actions.

In December, Oregon Governor Kate Brown released a statement saying, “As Oregon prepares for what could be our worst surge in hospitalizations during this pandemic, I know that this is not the beginning of the new year any of us had hoped for. Time and again over the last two years, Oregonians have proven that we will stand with each other in our most difficult times. Your actions have saved lives, and it is because we have worked together to keep each other safe that Oregon still has some of the lowest infection and mortality rates in the nation. Please, do your part again—get vaccinated, get your booster shot, and wear a mask.”

This call for personal responsibility by Governor Brown belies that fact that her administration is forcing schools and workplaces to remain open and operate in person during this “worst surge in hospitalizations.” Despite claims of the “lowest infection rates in the country,” Oregon’s hospitals are so overwhelmed that Governor Brown made the decision to activate the Oregon National Guard to assist understaffed hospitals and long-term care facilities.

Schools are being forced to return to in-person learning under dangerous conditions precisely to allow students’ parents to be forced back to their workplaces to continue generating profits for corporations and Wall Street despite high risks to workers’ health and lives.

These walkouts are part of a broad struggle against the unsafe reopening of schools and businesses that is being carried out by students, parents and educators across the US in places like New York City, Chicago, Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, Portland, Baton Rouge and more.

The IYSSE and the WSWS ask all students, teachers and educators to join the growing movement for the protection of their lives against the dangerous Omicron variant of COVID-19 by resisting the unsafe opening of schools in the US and internationally.



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