

“This return is going to kill people and it doesn’t need to happen”

British Columbia university students hold walkout to protest unsafe return to in-person classes

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Dozens of university students at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, in the Canadian province of British Columbia, walked out Monday, on the first day of in-person learning after the holiday break. They enjoyed the support of over 4,000 students who signed a petition protesting the dangerous return to face-to-face classes and the refusal of the university administration to offer an online option for students concerned about getting infected by the highly-contagious Omicron variant during the worst surge of the COVID-19 pandemic so far.

“This return is going to kill people and it doesn’t need to happen,” Emma Hacker, one of the students who walked out, told CTV News. “Continued spread of Omicron is going to cause untold harm, not only to vulnerable members of the community but to the entire Lower Mainland.”

Another student, describing why they walked out, said that classrooms are packed, with students sitting side by side. “Why weren’t we consulted? Why weren’t we asked how we wanted the school to be run?” she remarked.

The petition, signed by over 4,650 people, declares that the university’s decision to force students back into in-person classes is “not an ethical choice.” It explains:

Omicron infects both completely vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals, and it is not the only variant that is infecting individuals. Since SFU is not equipped with audio/visual recording systems in every classroom, nor are all instructors willing to record their lectures, with the current decision of SFU, students are forced to go to school despite their discomfort. Students will need to transit to SFU, which means they need to be in contact with strangers that may or may not have COVID. If any one student in the classroom is sick, all other

students are at risk. Some students are immunocompromised, or have high-risk family members, but they are forced to put themselves and their family members at risk because SFU is not giving them options to stay home. Once infected, the students will have to either miss classes because of the lack of audio/visual recording systems or the unwillingness of the instructor to record lecture, or risk spreading the disease.

The petition went on to address the questions of Long COVID and the pandemic’s impact on students’ mental health. “There are also symptoms of COVID like dysregulated sense of smell and taste that even scientists don’t know how long they would last,” the petition points out. “There are also rising evidence [sic] that COVID not only affects the respiratory system but also the central nervous system including the brain (Marshall, 2020). We still do not know how long these damages to the body would last, and what effects the damages might have. But we know that, if more people are infected with COVID, there is a higher chance that COVID will mutate and create a new variant.

“The stress of the pandemic, and the anxiety caused by knowing we are at risk of getting and spreading a deadly disease is taking a toll on students’ mental health, and will severely hinder their performance.”

The students’ determination to protect themselves and their colleagues from the potentially deadly virus stands in stark contrast to the profit-driven motives of university administrators and the capitalist governments at all levels who stand behind them. Post-secondary education in Canada, like elsewhere, is a multi-billion-dollar business that views students as consumers and cash cows. Online learning

involves a significant loss of revenue for universities, not only due to the reduced business for food providers and other amenities on campus, but also due to the reduced use of lucrative student accommodation and lower tuition fees.

The relentless drive to force in-person learning amid a record-breaking surge of infections due to the Omicron variant is provoking fierce opposition among broad layers of students and education workers. Student-led walkouts and wildcat sickouts organized by rank-and-file teachers have erupted across Canada and the United States, and throughout Europe.

Hundreds of Manitoba high school students organized a walkout to protest the unsafe reopening of schools last week. Teachers in Ontario and British Columbia have taken job action by filing work refusals and refusing to enter unsafe schools.

Students and staff at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec organized a petition calling for instruction to remain online until community transmission is under control. It has garnered over 12,000 signatures. Undergraduate students from the McGill University School of Social Work voted by a margin of 93 percent to strike in opposition to in-person instruction from Monday. As Jo Roy, a third-year student and a strike organizer explained to the CBC, “Many of us, especially in the second- and third- years of our programs, do field placements twice a week in community-based settings... So our chief concern is the clients we work with and the possibility of spreading COVID to the communities.”

McGill students have been complaining for months about the lack of transparency provided by the administration about the number of COVID-19 cases on campus. “There had been COVID positive students who had gone to classes, who had gone to social events and we were not informed,” a student told City News Montreal in September 2021. “It kind of created a panic within the school when we realize the McGill administration isn’t telling us when we’re in contact with COVID positive cases.”

When students tried to establish their own case reporting system, the university ordered them to shut it down, accusing them of breaching public health guidelines.

Students at St. Clair College in the Windsor, Ontario area have organized a petition that has attracted over 1,500 signatures. It calls for the immediate return to online learning while the pandemic continues to break records of infection and hospitalization. Another petition at Western University in London, Ontario requesting the continuation of an online learning option has garnered over 3,600 signatures.

The province of Prince Edward Island (PEI) only recorded its first and second deaths due to COVID-19 on January 14 this year. The island of some 156,000 inhabitants has already

recorded another four deaths, bringing the total death count to six. The small province was largely spared the worst of the pandemic, with official case numbers at 0 or in the single and double digits up until January of this year. The 7-day average has remained in the hundreds ever since. The University of Prince Edward Island was forced to declare a delay in return to in-person classes until the end of February as a result.

With most post-secondary institutions across the country set to reopen by the first week of February at the latest, the recent series of protests shows that opposition is mounting. As with previous waves of the pandemic, the premature reopening of schools and universities for in-person learning has led to dramatic rises in cases, hospitalizations and deaths. Public schools were forced open by provincial governments during the first half of January with virtually no protective measures. Even though most experts warn that case numbers have yet to reach their peak, the response by the ruling class has been to abandon any and all public health measures to contain the virus, and to undermine the ability to even keep track of the growing rate of infections.

The imperviousness of capitalist governments—from British Columbia’s social-democratic NDP to the “Quebec first” CAQ, the hard-right Progressive Conservative governments in Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta, and their collaborators in the trade unions—to the most elementary health and safety concerns of the population demonstrates the need for the organization of independent rank-and-file safety committees in every school and workplace. Through these committees, students and educators must spearhead the drive to shut down unsafe schools and non-essential businesses, as part of a working-class offensive for the implementation of a Zero COVID policy, and the reorganization of social and economic life to meet human need, not private profit. This struggle is being spearheaded among educators and students in Canada by the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC)

We encourage all students who agree with this program to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which fights to bring a socialist and internationalist program to students and young workers across Canada and around the world.



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