

With Detroit schools set to open for in person classes

Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee joins with autoworkers to demand the shutdown of schools and nonessential businesses

Michigan teachers
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Detroit Public Schools Community District is set to reopen for in-person instruction on Monday, January 31, following the demand by Superintendent Nikolai Vitti to end the month-long switch to all-virtual learning.

The demand by Vitti, in line with the policy of the administrations of Biden and Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, is not the result of a lessening of the danger of COVID-19. In fact, the state's test positivity rate stands at 30.5 percent and Detroit's at 20.1 percent—both statistics indicating a vast undercount of cases. Underscoring the devastating toll the virus has wrought on the state, it was announced last week that 2020 was the first year in Michigan's 187-year history where deaths exceeded births. In 2020 alone, 11,362 Michigan residents perished from COVID, with a total 31,985 lives lost so far in the Wolverine state.

On Wednesday, January 26, Governor Whitmer gave her State of the State address from the headquarters of auto parts producer Detroit Diesel, indicating her priorities. She made a point of demanding that children must be in buildings. "I want to be crystal clear. Students belong in school. We know it's where they learn best. Remote learning is not as fulfilling or conducive to a child's growth."

Her concerns, however, were not the "growth" of children, but were symbolized by her choice of venue for the yearly speech. She answers above all to automakers and industrialists, most of whom face a labor shortage. Whitmer, therefore insisted that schools reopen so that parents can work.

Whitmer also announced a \$2,500 state tax rebate to new purchasers of electric vehicles, part of a near \$1 billion state subsidy to automakers through the Strategic Outreach and Attraction Reserve (SOAR) program and cut-rate industrial electrical pricing. At the same time, schools are being starved of adequate resources and parents have been told that high-quality robust remote learning and pandemic aid is too

expensive.

In response to this social crime, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality held a meeting Wednesday. It brought together educators from districts across Michigan, autoworkers from Michigan and Indiana, and students and instructors from the University of Michigan and Ohio.

Participants mapped out a campaign to bring their fight to Detroit auto plants, issuing an Open Letter calling for a two- to three-month shutdown of schools and nonessential businesses, financial and social supports to families and small businesses, a systematic system of contact tracing, testing and high-quality remote instruction.

Motivating the initiative, Michigan educator Mitch Marcus pointed out that there were 117 new school outbreaks this week, up from 74 a week ago. He pointed to the critical fight to keep Detroit schools closed, stating, "Detroit has a very important history to the working class of the region and this country. We must wage a fight here. This is a battleground. The profit interests and their political lackeys want to set a precedent in Detroit, which is home to the largest school district in the state, to reopen under conditions of massive, continued spread. It is likewise spreading in the factories and killing autoworkers.

"We as school staff, parents, autoworkers and all workers must draw a line in the sand here. We should unify the movement to shut schools and move to remote learning with the struggle of autoworkers for their own safety. Any fight by teachers to address the pandemic's impact in schools requires breaking out of the narrow confines imposed by the unions.

"I look forward to a discussion about fighting to build the broadest unity between teachers, students and larger sections of the working class."

Members of the committee spoke enthusiastically, agreeing to

join a campaign at Detroit's auto plants and determined to fight against the needless herding of children and workers into deadly workplaces.

"I can only say I'm scared to death in my office," said a school worker. "To me it just sounds like they want us to get sick or they're trying to get herd immunity—something! I don't know *what* they're doing but none of this makes sense with not being able to quarantine when you have somebody with COVID in the home. We can do our jobs from home. We've done it." She explained that her coworker has an infected child at home but is not allowed to quarantine due to the district's revamped "mitigations."

"As a parent," a university worker related, "I still don't feel comfortable because ... even though my son is vaccinated, breakthroughs can happen. It just doesn't make me feel safe." She concluded that "that's all about dollars... My heart hurts for these kids and teachers and administrators."

A University of Michigan public health student emphasized that ICUs in the area were overflowing, citing examples including St. Joe's [Mercy Hospital] 98 percent; Beaumont Hospital in Taylor, 94 percent; Beaumont Hospital in Trenton, 92 percent. She emphasized, "When hospitals get overwhelmed patients can't get the care they need. Policies that are being implemented in the schools and universities across the country and state are absolutely nonsensical. What exactly do students gain being taught by a teacher on the screen in an auditorium while all the students are in the same room? The only reason for it is to keep kids in school so the parents can go to work."

She expressed her gratitude to the Rank-and-File Educators organizers, saying, "I'm just glad that we do at least have a group where we can discuss it and think about what we can do because this is not tenable and we should not stand for it."

A paraprofessional school worker debunked the claim reopening schools was necessary for the mental health of children. He cited a 2018 study, "The Burden of Bereavement," which emphasized that "the loss of a parent is one of the most stressful events that a child can experience. Bereaved children suffer depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and functional impairment." He concluded, "The shutdown and closure of schools would help children's mental health, not take away from it."

A founding member of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee in Columbus, Indiana, informed the educators and parents, "We follow your struggle. You're not the only ones in this struggle. The autoworkers are in this struggle. The mine workers are in this struggle. We're all in the struggle together."

"Our government is confusing its own people to try to get away from having to deal with this COVID-19. They don't want to deal with it because they want the billionaires and millionaires to keep making money because that means it puts money in their pocket. Well, they don't care about us. Jeff Bezos spent \$80 million to go up in the capsule and come down. Eighty million dollars could have helped a whole lot of

people quarantine."

He urged others to join and build rank-and-file committees, stating, "We the people could stop it, the rank-and-file committees. They're made up by the people, for the people. The government doesn't want that because they can't stop us. They are few. We are many. We need to stick together no matter what job we're in, whether it's teachers, bus drivers, ironworkers, miners, auto plant workers, whatever. When we stand together, we are a force to reckon with."

"We need to make sure that they don't try, like with the wars, to divert our minds from what we're doing against this COVID-19. Like they blame China for the COVID-19, yet China is the one that showed that if they quarantine, if they get the shots, if they do the contact tracing, and everything like they're supposed to do, they can get rid of it. They have more people in that country, the most, and yet they have a relatively low count of COVID-19. They did it right. All the other countries, they want to get it wrong because they don't want the millionaires to lose money. That's all it is about is money."

Another teacher said, "It's going to be scary in terms of being back in the classroom with 25 to 30 kids sitting three feet apart. They're not doing the contact tracing. I feel as though we're going back into an unsafe environment, but the reason is because Count Day [the state-mandated day to determine funding levels] is coming up. And the students are not showing up for virtual."

She concluded, echoing the sentiments of the committee, "The walkouts are great. It shows that the students feel unsafe in the classrooms as well. Linking up with the auto workers would be great because a lot of the other workers have children in the school and that would help on a larger scale."

Randall, a parent and an autoworker, said, "One of the very big fears I have is sending my five-year-old who is vaccinated back to school. If she were to bring it home and my other kids were to get it, it could possibly lead to my 81-year-old grandmother who lives upstairs. It's just a terrifying, terrifying situation that we're in right now. I do believe that we all need to unite, auto workers and teachers, for a walkout together. We need to stand up and fight for this. This is something that's not going to go away if we don't fight."

One schoolworker added, "We're going to have to take this to the streets because there's so much money involved. It's all about greed. So we're going to have to stand up and have a revolution. Bottom line."



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