

Detroit teachers oppose resumption of in-person classes for 50,000 students

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The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding its next public meeting at 7pm Eastern this Wednesday, February 2. Register today and invite your coworkers, family and friends to participate.

Public schools are reopening in Detroit on Monday after a month of virtual-only classes because of the high rates of COVID-19 throughout the city. This reckless action in Michigan's largest school district will imperil the health and lives of 50,000 students and more than 5,000 teachers and other school employees who work with them each day.

As of January 29, there was a 20.4 percent test positivity rate in the city, according to the Detroit Health Department's COVID-19 Dashboard, and 32 percent in surrounding Wayne County. In an email last week, Detroit Public Schools Community District Superintendent Nikolai Vitti falsely claimed the city's positivity rate was 12 percent. The monthlong delay in in-person classes, which followed the two-week holiday break, reduced the city's test positivity rate by 16 points, from 36.4 percent on January 6.

Rather than keep schools closed and conducting a suite of public health measures to further reduce the transmission of the disease and save lives, city and school officials are following the lead of the Biden administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) by promoting mass infection. Joining several other states, the Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services advised local health officials they no longer had to do broad contact tracing even as the state broke a pandemic high in new daily cases.

"We know the schools are not safe, and this is about corporations making money," Casey, a veteran Detroit public school science teacher, told the WSW. "They're rolling the dice hoping another mutation won't pop up. It's disgusting. So many people are dying, and every 26 hours another billionaire is being minted."

Schools are being opened in Detroit despite the low vaccination rates in the largely impoverished city. While 80 percent of school employees are fully vaccinated, just 38 percent of city residents are fully vaccinated, according to

Chalkbeat Detroit. Of these, only 5 percent of 5- to 11-year-olds and 22 percent of 12- to 15-year-olds have been fully vaccinated. Only 28 percent of all 16- to 19-year-olds have been fully vaccinated, the publication reported.

Using the CDC-reduced guidelines as a justification, officials from the Detroit Public Schools Community District have halved quarantine time to five days for COVID-positive students and teachers and eliminated any quarantine time for exposed students and school employees.

In a letter to parents, Superintendent Vitti invented new categories of "low-risk" and "high risk" settings to abandon even the most minimal protective measures. "Effective immediately, contact tracing will no longer be required for lower-risk school settings such as classrooms, buses, and most extracurricular activities where multiple safety mitigation strategies are in place. For lower-risk school settings, the COVID-positive person needs to quarantine and the COVID Qualtrics survey should be completed by the principal/supervisor or her designee, but no individuals need to quarantine. However, as a district, we will still share any and all positive cases for in-person employees and students through robo calls/texts and through our district website."

A slipshod contact tracing regimen is reserved only for "higher risk" school settings, including "lunchroom/cafeteria/classrooms utilized for lunch, high risk extracurricular (e.g., basketball, ice hockey, competitive cheer, wrestling, unmasked theater, band and choir) classes or school events where masks cannot/are not worn, household close contacts of a positive case who cannot isolate, any declared outbreaks and when an educator has been in school while infectious." Only then will contact tracing be implemented for "close contacts," defined as those "individuals who are within 3 feet of the COVID-positive individual for a cumulative period of 15 minutes or more over 24 hours."

Scoffing at the "High Risk versus Low Risk" scenario, one teacher, Angela, posted on Facebook, "Look at this BS! They are trying to kill us!" Another teacher, Maria, commented, "The bottom line is unless there is a nuclear

war or a zombie apocalypse, SCHOOL WILL REMAIN OPEN AND FACE TO FACE! Covid is no longer a factor.”

Another teacher pointing to the Detroit Health Department’s updated guidance for school quarantining, told the WSWs, “If I have a high school class with 30 students, they mean to tell me that five students can be sick, and we will not quarantine? This means they want us all to get sick!”

Teachers denounced the comments by Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer last week, who declared, “Students belong in school” and that “Remote learning is not as fulfilling or conducive to a child’s growth.”

“Is it conducive for a child’s growth to be infected or killed by COVID?” a veteran teacher declared. “They are letting the virus rip, claiming we will [have] ‘natural immunity’ but over two-thirds of the Omicron cases are reinfections.”

Dr. Lauren Yagiela, a pediatric critical care specialist at Detroit Medical Center Children’s Hospital, provided a heart-wrenching description of the state of infected children in her hospital at a press conference earlier this month. “In this current COVID surge, we are experiencing the highest number of COVID-positive admissions to the hospital and the pediatric ICU since the beginning of the pandemic.

“Many of these children have serious heart dysfunction. The children we have cared for with COVID pneumonia, COVID myocarditis and multisystem organ syndrome have often required a variety of medical treatments to help support their hearts and lungs when they are sick.

“Many children have required serious procedures, including breathing tubes and ventilators; medications to improve their heart function and raise their blood pressure after it drops dangerously low; and placement of IVs in their necks or groins.

“Heart-lung bypass, with extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, meaning their blood has to be pumped out of their body to a machine that replaces the function of their heart and lungs. Many children have developed febrile seizures, which occur in the setting of a fever, or continuous seizures that are dangerous to the brain.”

Casey, who has been teaching in Detroit schools for over 20 years, contrasted the feigned concerns over the academic and emotional well-being of children coming from Whitmer and other corporate-controlled politicians to the reality of endless austerity imposed by both big business parties. Over the last two decades, the district has closed over 200 schools and laid off thousands of teachers, while funneling money to for-profit charter schools.

“For the first 10 years I had no supplies, I had to write grants for everything in my science classes. I worked in the southwest side of Detroit, which had many poor families,

including immigrant workers and kids who had to leave school from December to February because they were migrant workers. I had students stay after school to help me, and I found out it was because they had no light or heat at home. My school was a good 100 years old when it closed. It had plaster falling and rodents.”

The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), like its national parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, has fully backed the school reopening based on the lie that it can be done “safely.” But rank-and-file teachers are organizing independently of the union to rally workers in the city to stop the reckless reopening.

A meeting of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee held last week, attended by teachers and parents in Detroit and other cities, along with auto and auto parts workers, issued a call for joint action to close schools and nonessential workplaces to stop the spread of COVID-19 and save lives, while providing income to workers and small businesses affected by the temporary closures.

The open letter from Detroit teachers to autoworkers said in part: “We are not appealing to the powers that be. They are interested in protecting profits, not lives. We aim to unify with autoworkers and other workers to prepare a city-wide strike to fight for the necessary public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 in Michigan, in unity with rank-and-file committees across the world fighting for the same global strategy to end the pandemic.”

For more information on joining the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, contact the WSWs.



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