

“Children are dying from COVID. Healthy people are dying from COVID”

## McGill University students strike against in-person classes

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Hundreds of students at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec are currently on strike in opposition to the administration’s demand that all students return to in-person classes as Canada continues to see some of the worst hospitalization and death rates of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students from the faculties of Social Work, Graduate Education and Law voted by overwhelming majorities to reject the reckless return to face-to-face learning. Arts students are also currently in the process of voting to join the strike.

As a result of these votes, McGill was forced to provide hybrid learning for students wishing to stay remote. However, the administration is leading a campaign of intimidation to force students back to campus.

The students’ strike action is part of an emerging global opposition movement among educators and students against the homicidal decision by governments to enforce the mass infection of the population with the highly contagious Omicron variant. Omicron has fueled a deadly fifth wave in Canada, with the seven-day average of deaths close to the highest level since the pandemic began.

Two organizers of the strike movement, Emma, a PhD student in her second year at the Faculty of Education, and Hannah, a third-year student in the bachelor of social work, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about their action.

Hannah started by explaining that the strike was the result of over a year of efforts to secure safe learning from the Social Work Committee for Accessible Education, which involves students and professors. “One student came to the council at the school of social work with a motion demanding hybrid learning,” she said. “We saw the state of classrooms, we felt the anxiety, it was not conducive to a good learning environment. We also see being in class in-person as an unethical decision because it represents a threat to our clients.”

Rejecting the lies promoted by Canadian governments and the media that Omicron is “mild” and that kids “don’t get sick,” Hannah declared, “We need to base things on science and on this idea that every individual is just as worthy of living as I am. And this honesty about death. People die. Children are dying from COVID. Healthy people are dying from COVID. I think every death from COVID is a preventable death.”

Hannah then explained how the situation developed at McGill in the face of the university administration’s determination to reopen campus. “With pressure from students and professors the School of Social Work (SSW) director sent an email on January 4 saying they were going to be doing remote learning until March break (February 25th),” she said. “A couple days later we received an email from the SSW saying that McGill administration had forced them to rescind that decision and that we would be returning to in-person, undermining the hours and hours of advocacy we did to learn safely. We had no other choice but to strike. The motion was put together, we gathered enough signatures, and we held a general assembly, which was one of the highest attended we had in a really long time. The vote passed by an enormous majority. We are on strike until February 25, and we will have another vote on March 4 to decide if we continue the strike.”

She also noted that the university said it would allow students in her school who wish to attend class in-person to do so. However, according to an anonymous poll put out by several professors, none of the respondents wished to do so.

The Social Work strike resolution states: “Our healthcare system is in crisis, case counts are in the tens of thousands, and our hospitals are running out of space. Moreover, those in U2 and U3 are on the frontlines during all this, serving vulnerable communities and peoples. Telling students that they need to come to class in poorly ventilated and

maintained buildings, only for McGill to send those students to work with vulnerable people on other days of the week, is a risk and threat to the communities we serve.”

Hannah went on to explain that McGill did nothing to ensure the protection of students and staff from the potentially deadly virus. “The School of Social Work is actually condemned because it is unlivable, so we were moved to the Arts building,” she commented. “I remember vividly one student comparing us crammed in that classroom to indigenous children in residential schools being crammed in classrooms with tuberculosis spreading. He touched the ventilation which had dust on it. So no, the university hasn’t done anything to provide us a safe environment. Cramming a bunch of students who work across CIUSSS (integrated university health and social service centres) and hospitals across Quebec among the most vulnerable populations—the homeless, the indigenous—it’s not a good idea. School is a super spreader event. It’s unsafe even if we wear our mask, because we are shoulder to shoulder. There’s no social distancing.”

Emma said that in the Education faculty, “there are hundreds of students who are interns during the days and have evening classes on campus. A recent article noted that there were 48,000 children out sick from COVID-19 in Quebec. McGill claims that the education building is mechanically well ventilated, we have CO2 monitors, etc., but they are very reticent about giving details about that. There’s an evident lack of transparency. But we know, according to McGill’s own tests, that many classrooms are not adequately ventilated.”

Emma went on to explain that McGill does everything it can to deny that transmission occurs in class. “It seems they are assuming that a classroom is the least dangerous place you could be, which seems wrong to me,” she stated. “Since early January, they’ve actually stopped attempting to record transmission in classrooms completely, but it was announced very quietly in their COVID web page.”

“It’s really emotionally taxing because we are up against McGill, which is using terms such as ‘boycotting’ and ‘skipping classes,’” Hannah continued. “No one is daring to use the word ‘strike’ because they try to reduce our collective power. We were flattered when 2-3 days after we voted to strike, McGill released a 40-minute propaganda video about how great it is to be in-person. Each person in that video was recorded over Zoom.”

The students confront immense pressure from the university, which has the backing of Premier François Legault’s CAQ (Coalition Avenir Quebec) government. Despite limited support received from different student associations, many unions have refused to support the students. Teachers’ unions, such as the McGill Course

Lecturers and Instructors Union, have not supported the strike, let alone mobilize their own members to fight alongside students for remote learning as a means to stop the spread of the virus and save lives.

But the allies of the students in the struggle for safe learning environments and workplaces are stronger still. Across the United States and Europe, high school students, teachers and other workers have organized walkouts and protests over recent weeks in opposition to the policy of mass infection and death. In Manitoba, students at 90 high schools walked out of class last month to demand safe education.

Educators and students have established the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Committee (CERSC) to unify these struggles on the basis of the struggle for a global COVID-19 elimination strategy. Through its support for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the CERSC fights to unite these struggles across Canada with those of educators and young people in the US, Europe and around the world.

When the WSWs reporters explained the Zero COVID policy fought for by the CERSC, Hannah said she supported it “100 percent.” She supported the closing of all schools and non-essential production with full pay to workers and students until the pandemic is brought under control, along with a whole series of health measures and massive investment in health care. Emma added, “To get to COVID Zero we would have to confront the profit-focused nature of the university.”

After the reporters underlined that the last two years have demonstrated that the fight against the pandemic is a fight against capitalism and for a socialist transformation of society led by the working class, Emma concluded, “Absolutely, no revolution without internationalism.”



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