

To fight COVID-19, Michigan educators must build independent rank-and-file committees

Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
7 October 2022

*Educators, parents, students: **register now** to attend the next online meeting of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on October 15.*

*And please **fill out our questionnaire** to help us get the truth out about COVID-19 in schools.*

Over a month into the fall semester at K-12 schools in Michigan, it has become abundantly clear to educators, parents and students—despite the incessant lies of the government and the unions that “the pandemic is over”—that COVID-19 is yet again spreading rapidly in school buildings across the state.

A teacher at Cass Technical High School, the largest school in Detroit, told our committee about the situation there. “Teachers and students are out sick constantly and the district is hammering on attendance. About 2,500 students are packed into classes of more than 30 each,” the teacher described. “I’d say about 40 percent of students, teachers and staff are masked. The building has many rooms without any windows or ventilation, and faculty in those rooms seem to have a high rate of illness.”

But less than three weeks ago, in a 60 Minutes segment filmed in downtown Detroit at the North American International Auto Show, US President Joe Biden said, verbatim, “The pandemic is over.” He added, “If you notice, no one is wearing a mask. Everyone seems to be in pretty good shape.”

This was a lie.

Even the official numbers, which have always been an undercount, show that across the US an average of more than 50,000 people are now testing positive for COVID-19 and more than 400 are dying from it every day, according to the tracker Medriva. Pediatric hospitals in major cities including Chicago, New Orleans, Seattle and Austin have recently reported bed and staff shortages due to a sudden influx of patients with COVID-19 and other respiratory diseases following the reopening of schools.

In 2020 and 2021, the reopening of schools in the fall corresponded with huge surges in COVID-19 infections and deaths across the US and internationally. The result was two “Winters of Death” in a row, during which the lion’s share of the over one million Americans who have died from COVID-19 succumbed to the virus.

The reason that schools contribute so powerfully to community spread is well-understood by scientists. COVID-19 spreads from person to person via tiny aerosols that linger in the air. Buildings full of badly-ventilated classrooms packed with students and teachers from different households form an ideal transmission belt for the virus to infect entire communities. The same is true for Detroit’s auto factories and many other workplaces.

If anything, the danger is greater this year, because while the virus continues to circulate and new variants continue to emerge, systematic reporting of cases and deaths has been drastically cut back, and the mitigation measures taken in past years, inadequate as they were, have been almost entirely scrapped. Individuals are being left to fend for themselves while the virus continues to attack all of society.

On Wednesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that starting October 20, they will switch from daily to weekly reporting of national COVID-19 infections and deaths. In June, the state of Michigan stopped location-based reporting of K-12 outbreaks, leaving educators, parents and students in the dark. The same Cass Tech teacher explained, “one day recently we had dozens of teachers out, and there were no reports to the rest of us about what was going on. Students will self-report to their teachers that they have COVID, but there’s no way of knowing any total numbers, and there’s no contact tracing.”

Though it no longer lists which schools are affected, Michigan’s coronavirus website indicates that there are now an astonishing 138 COVID-19 outbreaks presently underway at K-12 schools somewhere across the state, up from 123 the week before. An additional 21 active outbreaks are in a category that includes child care and school sports. But, as the webpage also states, “Many factors [...] may result in significant underreporting of outbreaks.”

Michigan claims on another page that 132 per 100,000 school-aged children (5-18 years old) in the state now have active cases of COVID-19, with the largest percentage of them in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties of the metro Detroit area.

A Flint parent told our committee, “My children are four and five and they caught COVID within three days of returning to

school. They were sick on September 14th. I sent them back on the 20th because the school said when they are symptom free after five days they can come back. They went back to school on the 20th and now my five year old is sick again... I can send them in with a mask, but what happens at school I cannot say, especially when they see everyone else without a mask.”

A huge portion of cases are going totally unreported. Dr. Christopher Murray, director of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), told NBC News last month that he estimated no more than 5 percent of cases are being reported to public health departments in the US. He further explained, “Waning immunity from the last BA.5 round of infections and waning immunity from vaccination combined with people being indoors should combine to mean that we should see infections start to go back up starting in October and go up quite a bit.”

Educators must act now to stop a third Winter of Death! Scientists have shown that COVID-19 can still be eliminated and the pandemic can actually be brought to an end, but only through a program that includes systematic testing, reporting and contact tracing, and critically, the temporary closures of workplaces and schools—the two primary vectors for the spread of the airborne virus—with parents and all workers provided with full financial support.

As a section of the international working class, educators could wield enormous power to fight COVID-19 if united in struggle with autoworkers, railroad and airline workers, Amazon workers, health care workers, and meatpackers, all of whom are also continuing to catch COVID-19 at work.

But in order to fight for such an outcome, educators must face the fact that the official trade unions, including and especially the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) and their affiliates, have played an outright treacherous role during the pandemic.

The teachers “unions”—in fact massive bureaucracies and unions in name only—are some of the largest in the country, with millions of members across all 50 states from whom they collect dues and who they claim to represent. But far from waging a fight, the unions have facilitated the deadly “forever COVID” policy of the ruling class by keeping teachers divided between districts and states, isolated from other sections of workers in their areas, and misinformed about not only the dangers of the pandemic, but also the possibility of bringing it to an end through school and workplace closures.

This is perhaps expressed most sharply in the person of AFT president Randi Weingarten, a multi-millionaire who garners over \$400,000 a year in teachers’ dues money. Last summer, Weingarten went on a nationwide “Back to school for all” tour, which culminated in the opening of schools for in-person learning in fall 2021 and the largest surge of COVID-19 to date in the US.

Our Cass Tech teacher explained the attitude of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) bureaucracy. “We haven’t had

any communication from the district union regarding sickness and cases, and the union rep at my school told us we should consider what we want to do for ourselves, and that the district wasn’t ‘inclined’ to provide mitigations anymore. The school supplied us with surgical masks, which don’t block aerosols, and a tiny HEPA filter and a fan for ventilation, but it’s not nearly enough and there’s no guidance on how or why to use even these small token measures.”

Weingarten and her ilk in the union bureaucracy do not answer to the needs and demands of rank-and-file teachers, many of whom work multiple jobs and scrape and save to buy school supplies and PPE for their classrooms. These people are not workers’ leaders, but toadies of the corporate-financial oligarchy.

According to Forbes, by May 4, 2022, the day that the official COVID-19 death toll in the US surpassed one million, the wealth of America’s 727 billionaires had increased by \$1.71 trillion since the start of the pandemic. The unions made this huge upward transfer of wealth possible by keeping schools and workplaces open no matter the cost in lives, a policy they continue to implement today.

Teachers should follow the example of Will Lehman, the rank-and-file autoworker who is now running for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW). Lehman calls for abolishing the UAW bureaucracy, which like the teachers unions has prevented workers from fighting, and establishing a network of rank-and-file committees on the shop floors of every auto factory to put power directly into workers’ hands. The last two years have shown that teachers need such committees no less than autoworkers.

The **Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee** is fighting to stop the pandemic by organizing educators, students and parents independently of and in opposition to the teachers union bureaucracies. As part of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), our committee unites educators in Michigan with committees of educators across the US and internationally, as well as committees of autoworkers, railroad workers, transportation workers, Amazon workers, health care workers, and more, in a common fight to put workers in power and end the pandemic once and for all.

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