

An emergency meeting of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee discusses death of Jimari Williams and fight against school layoffs

Gwen Lee
22 May 2023

We want to hear from you. If you have information about a school outbreak or are ready to get involved in our fight for safe schools, contact the Michigan Rank-and-File Educators Safety Committee now! Fill out the form at the end of this article, or write to educators@wsws.org

On Saturday, May 20, the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (MERFSC) held an emergency meeting, “After the death of Jimari Williams: Mobilize educators, parents and students to defend public health and stop school layoffs.”

The meeting was called in the wake of the tragic death of Jimari Williams, a six-year-old elementary school student at the Marcus Garvey Academy in Detroit. Numerous other children were sickened in what was publicly described as a cluster of “flu-like illnesses” at the school. The cause of Jimari’s death has still not been made public.

Committee supporters spoke to many parents and educators at the school in the days leading up to the meeting. They heard first hand the traumatizing impact of the sudden death of the young child.

School officials never directly informed other parents about Jimari’s death. Instead, parents told committee members that they learned about it from the local media. The overwhelming sentiment of parents and educators was anger at being kept in the dark and support for the demand to close the school until it is safe.

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee members also addressed parents and educators at the recent Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) school board meeting, alerting the audience to the still-unexplained death of Jimari and the fact that schools are not safe. Committee members connected the fight against layoffs in the district with the fight for safe working and learning conditions.

Detroit teacher and MERFSC chairperson Phyllis Scherrer opened the meeting by stating that the committee was organized December 4, 2020 to resist the unsafe reopening of schools during the pandemic, first under Donald Trump and then under Democratic President Joe Biden. The committee is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The cutoff of COVID-19 relief money has been used to lay off educators and cut school funding in a district that has been hit by decades of budget cuts and the diversion of resources to publicly funded and privately run charter schools.

Zac Corrigan, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party, gave the political report. He explained that the *World Socialist Web Site* had contacted the Wayne County Health Department last week and was told that Jimari’s autopsy is not expected to be released until some time between August and November. He asked, “How can parents trust that their child is safe when we don’t know the most basic information? At

least two dangerous airborne pathogens, COVID-19 and H. Influenza, are known to be spreading. Yet the school remains open.”

He emphasized that the brief closure for “deep cleaning” was totally inadequate because a comprehensive approach is necessary when dealing with airborne diseases. Corrigan called for universal testing, contact tracing and quarantining of sick individuals.

“We call for the closure of Marcus Garvey Academy until a full investigation is done and a committee of rank-and-file educators and parents, working together with trusted scientists, deems the school safe!” Corrigan demanded. He called for the immediate release of all information about Jimari’s death and the outbreak at Marcus Garvey.

Corrigan noted that according to the CDC, COVID-19 has killed 2,203 children in the past three years and well over a million Americans. He warned that despite the Biden administration’s end to the Public Health Emergency, coronavirus continues to spread and mutate. “While systematic tracking of the virus has now been dismantled, some 12,000 ‘excess deaths’ are still attributable to the pandemic every day globally.

“Even if Jimari did not die of COVID-19,” Corrigan pointed out, “his health was almost certainly impacted by it. Over 96 percent of US children (65.7 million) are estimated to have had COVID-19 at least once. The disease is known to potentially damage all organ systems, including the immune system, making those who have had COVID-19 more likely to get seriously ill from other diseases.”

Dr. Benjamin Mateus gave a detailed medical report to the group. He indicted the Biden administration for ending the public health emergency as codifying “the permanent embedding” of COVID-19 in society, allowing it to continue to “infect, disable and kill masses of people for the foreseeable future.” He emphasized, “We know that COVID-19 causes immune misregulation. To what extent are children now predisposed to suffering from diseases they wouldn’t have before as a byproduct of their infection? This is an open question.”

Other outcomes of the unending COVID-19 pandemic, explained Dr. Mateus, included accelerated aging and Long COVID. (A detailed synopsis of Dr. Mateus’ report will be published soon on the *World Socialist Web Site*.)

These reports prompted a wide-ranging discussion on the implications of the attacks on public health, the trauma suffered by students and educators during the pandemic and the way forward to fight.

Michelle, a high school teacher, said, “I really wanted to thank you for all this helpful information and for putting it into perspective. It is helpful to understand that these things are happening throughout the world and not just in our local communities. It’s priceless.” She said her union has done little to nothing to help keep teachers safe. “I brought up the

possibility of getting carbon monoxide detectors in our room just to see if our [HEPA] units were working properly. My unit is constantly not working properly.

“There have been lots of students who have been ill,” she continued. “I have students that have lost parents. Students still come into school sick. It is frustrating, and it feels like there is very little we can do about it.”

Michelle explained that her two kids have both had COVID-19 twice, and she is deeply concerned about the long-term impact of the illnesses. Her daughter has recently been diagnosed with bone degeneration, which she worries may be connected with her COVID-19 infections.

David, the president of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Wayne State University, related, “I had friends who lost parents and grandparents to COVID-19. It was hard for people. The pandemic forced young people like me to confront these questions head on. It radicalized young people like me. The response of the government showed us, workers and youth, that we have to take care of ourselves. We have to fight.”

A parent from Marcus Garvey Academy admitted that she was still very emotional from the events of the past several weeks. She explained that her child stopped eating and ran a fever early in April and later learned about Jimari’s death. “My daughter has been exposed,” the parent said, “and I’d appreciate any advice. What can I do or the other parents whose children have been exposed?” She emphasized that the school authorities “have been silent as though this was not a major issue.”

Mary, a school district worker, added, “I see a lot of things that go on. It was said people are muted. They are basically censoring us, as far as being able to speak about concerns. I was told by a coworker that several teachers and staff have caught COVID over the last several weeks. The thing is, they are not discussing it anymore. We literally hear nothing about it. They are not talking about the students who become sick. It’s ignored.”

Mary went on to comment on the Detroit Public Schools Community District’s plans to eliminate dozens of positions throughout the district. “We are losing a lot of people who are retiring. The 150 jobs they are getting rid of are on top of these jobs we are losing from retirees. I don’t understand why these positions are being thrown away.”

Kay, a veteran music teacher, expressed a deep concern regarding the attack on public education and specifically on the arts. She is currently being victimized by the school administration who are threatening to fire her over absences (protected under the Family and Medical Leave Act, FMLA) when she was caring for her ill son.

“They are using my FMLA against me. They evaluated my class. I am always rated very highly on my performance. They have never followed protocol to formally say ‘she’s ineffective’ because they know that it is not true.”

Kay explained that the school administration has been constantly attacking the music department by cutting programs. “Right now I have band, orchestra and piano in the same class. So a student that was supposed to get a 50-minute lesson, maybe gets 15 minutes. They are sabotaging my program. They cancel my events, my concerts. Why deprive my students of their performances? I am being threatened every week. I have 22 years with the district.

“I am not just fighting for my position,” she explained. “I am fighting for my students and my program. You can’t just take music away.”

Khara, a DPSCD teacher, recalled the 2016 mass sickouts among Detroit teachers. She emphasized that teachers began to organize independently of the union to fight the intolerable conditions in Detroit schools. She said American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten flew in, saying, “We’ll handle it from here.” Khara continued, “What the AFT did was to shut down the momentum we had. Nothing has improved, but as we have discussed here, funding is still being cut and buildings are still falling apart.” She concluded, “The way

forward is through organizing independently of the union bureaucracies and the politicians,” before urging attendees to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee.

Phyllis Scherrer emphasized that teachers were in a fight against both corporate-backed parties. During the 2016 teacher sickouts, educators found themselves in a direct conflict with Democratic President Barack Obama whose Education Secretary Arne Duncan called Detroit “ground zero” for expansion of for-profit charter schools.

WSWS writer Nancy Hanover commented, “There is a great crime taking place. We see the destruction of education, and we see the indifference to the sickening and even death of children. With more than 1.2 million dead to COVID, we are seeing the degradation and ending of public health and public education.

“We cannot appeal to [DPSCD Superintendent] Nikolai Vitti, [Detroit Mayor] Duggan or Biden. We must mobilize differently.” She referenced a video clip of an African Clarios worker, speaking from Germany to the striking battery workers in Ohio, saying the only way forward was for workers of the world to unite. “We must clear the decks of those who say we must get on our hands and knees and ask for concessions—both the union bureaucracies and the pseudo-left.

“We are fighting for the future of society. If they can spend trillions at the drop of a hat for war, there is money. The trillions of wealth created by the working class must be put to social need. It is essential that we have a political program based on what the working class needs, not what the ruling elites say is affordable—a socialist program.”

Ed, a retired Detroit educator, denounced the layoffs of paraprofessionals and other educators and talked about the fact that pensions are also in jeopardy. He pointed to the tens of billions of dollars being funneled into the war in Ukraine. “We are talking about a system that can only offer more layoffs. To prosecute war, they need to impose austerity.”

Phyllis concluded the meeting urging everyone to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, read the *World Socialist Web Site* and get involved with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact