

Dangers mount as Detroit implements a “hybrid” return to school

By the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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Last week, teachers and other school workers formed the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to mobilize educators and other workers in the city to fight against the unsafe school reopening in Michigan’s largest school district.

On September 8, the Detroit Public School Community District opened, with roughly 80 percent of parents opting for all-virtual learning. The district has said it will allow families to switch between face-to-face and online each quarter, but parents are facing enormous financial pressure to return to work in the nation’s poorest large city. The hybrid model is being used to pave the way for forcing all students back into the classroom, no matter the cost in lives and health.

Our independent committee pledges to unify teachers, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, parents and students to fight on behalf of science and the protection of life and to oppose the homicidal back-to-work policies of Republicans and Democrats. We urge you to send us reports on the conditions in your school, so that we can inform all those being put at risk. We also invite those teachers working online, now overburdened and under-supported with distance learning demands, to speak up and tell your story. Please e-mail us at: educators@wsws.org.

There is no room for complacency. As schools opened nationally, more than 70,000 new cases of COVID-19 were identified among children between the last week of August and the first week of September. Michigan is one of more than half of US states that does not provide public data on COVID-19 in schools, although officials claim they will do so later this month. The failure of monitor and track outbreaks in schools will result in delays and deaths.

Michigan has been an epicenter of the disease,

experiencing 6,552 COVID deaths. More than half of these occurred in the metro Detroit counties of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb. Our district resides in Wayne County, and our school workers live in all three counties. A new outbreak will only add more suffering and death to those throughout our education community.

Educators must demand schools be fully closed immediately, and until the virus is under control. For those already forced back, we demand daily rapid testing and school-based contact tracing overseen by registered nurses. In addition, we demand adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), retrofitting of HVAC with infection control, the hiring of janitors and the expansion of deep cleaning.

The National Football League has boasted that it has administered more than a quarter million tests, providing daily tests to players, coaches and staff. These are supplemented with electronic “Safe Zone Tags” that warn an individual if they approach anyone within six feet and then tracks each contact if they test positive. We believe that every teacher and in fact every worker forced to go back into dangerous workplaces should have no less protection.

The online-only option is also being implemented with disregard for student learning, teachers and parents. On Tuesday, September 15, parents and students will protest at a Detroit School Board Meeting against the onerous and unworkable requirement for six hours of daily screen time for K-12 online learners.

The situation is also dire for paraprofessionals. One member of the Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee informs us that paraprofessionals are being given the ultimatum of working inside the schools or losing their jobs. Many are older and at risk due to their age, and this is nothing less than a death sentence.

One of our members, a paraprofessional in Detroit, informed us: “I just got back from another funeral due to COVID. I was down at Belle Isle last week too, for the memorial with the photos because I have lost so many in my family and friends already. My school is housed in a dilapidated building with low ventilation, lighting problems and a rodent problem. Many students are crowded into one building. It is very unsafe for not only students but teachers. Last spring when the schools were first closed, we worked online with the teachers. Many of my co-workers had no prior warning that we would be told to return for face-to-face work.

“My concerns are the right to life. I have many problems with asthma, and I take care of someone who has many underlying health illnesses. That means if I catch the coronavirus, I may be okay but the person I take care of may die. With my health issues, I may die all for this low wage job. This is unjust.”

Unlike teachers, paraprofessionals will not get paid sick leave if they contract COVID-19 in the buildings. Most support staff are extremely low paid and have few vacation or sick days.

There are not enough janitors to clean the mats in the gyms or wipe down the chairs where children are congregating. The para pro staff took on cleaning tasks to be sure the children were as safe as they could be in classrooms and lunches, but there needs to more janitors and cleaning staff hired.

Right now, paraprofessionals are the ones who separate the children at gym to make sure that they are socially distanced. It is next to impossible to socially distance in the gym with even 10 students.

Detroit teachers voted by 90 percent for a strike. But the Detroit Federation of Teachers signed onto a letter of agreement with Superintendent Nikolai Vitti to implement the back-to-school policy being pushed by the Trump administration, and backed by state Democrats like Governor Gretchen Whitmer, which is aimed at getting children out of their homes and their parents back into the factories pumping out profits for the corporations. But teachers, autoworkers, and striking grad student instructors at the University of Michigan insist that we have the right to live. That is why these struggles have to be unified.

The Detroit Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee urges teachers, support staff, bus drivers, parents and high school students in the Detroit

Community School District and other Michigan districts to speak out, get involved and join us!

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>