

“They should shut everything down again until they get the virus under control”

Mississippi bus drivers walk out as schools push ahead with unsafe reopenings

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The reopening of schools in Mississippi, as across the United States, has been a disaster for teachers, education workers, parents and students, and has already produced widespread infections across the state. Deplorable working conditions and an immediate reduction of hours and pay impelled 45 percent of school bus drivers in Columbus, Mississippi to walk out on Monday.

As of this writing, there have been outbreaks of COVID-19 reported at 720 schools in 74 of the 82 counties in Mississippi, roughly 90 percent of schools currently in session. On August 21, State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs reported that 900 students and educators had tested positive for the virus since schools reopened. Around 8,000 others have been ordered to quarantine. Multiple elementary and secondary schools have had to quarantine entire classes and even switch whole schools to virtual learning due to spreading cases among students and teachers.

As is the case across the country, school districts in Mississippi were given free rein in deciding how to begin the school year, with no unified plan of action. *Mississippi Today* reported on the details of districts failing to uphold COVID-19 reopening promises: from teachers being provided minimal cleaning and personal protective equipment, to inconsistent or absent enforcement of mask-wearing and social distancing. Already teachers are spending their own money to buy additional cleaning supplies.

To date, Mississippi has recorded 81,294 cases of COVID-19 and 2,413 deaths. As schools reopen, the number of tests being conducted is steadily declining, part of a broader nationwide trend demanded by the Trump administration. On August 5, 14,031 tests were reported in Mississippi; by August 24, only 8,414 tests were reported, a drop of 40 percent. On August 25, the reported seven-day average positive test rate was 33.2 percent.

Despite the surge in outbreaks, Republican Governor Tate Reeves absurdly claimed this week that school reopenings are going well. During a news conference on Tuesday, he said, “These numbers that we are seeing in our schools are not unexpected... I am pleased at the number of isolations we’re seeing, the number of quarantines we’re seeing, and I’m pleased that there are large numbers of Mississippi kids sitting in a classroom today and learning in a safe environment.”

Before reopening schools, Reeves pushed to reopen the Mississippi economy early on in the pandemic. By May 11, restrictions were eased for casinos, restaurants, gyms, barbershops, hair and nail salons and tattoo parlors, leading to a huge upsurge of the virus in the state.

Like their counterparts across the US and internationally, teachers and education workers are taking a stand against the unsafe reopening, using social media to discuss their working conditions, share best practices and disseminate information about outbreaks.

On July 17, teachers held a rally at the state capitol to protest the reckless reopening and “avoid preventable death.” The event was organized by a newly formed group, Mississippi Teachers Unite, which describes itself as a “non-affiliated group of teachers, support staff, parents, students and community members.” Their Facebook page, which has almost 2,000 supporters, states, “Chronically underfunded schools as well as unclear statewide guidelines do not give us the ability to reopen schools safely and will cause preventable long-term illness and death amongst students, teachers, staff, and their families.”

In another Facebook group of educators opposed to the reopening of schools, with over 2,200 members, one teacher noted that in the absence of getting information on positive cases directly from the schools and districts, she has decided to anonymously collect the data herself.

Another teacher voiced anger at the underlying issue of school funding: “A decade of underfunding Mississippi’s education leaves us standing here with our hands in the air! Districts have no money for resources to properly implement virtual learning, laptop shortages are a huge issue in most all districts across the state.”

Educators understand the need to intervene to stop this deadly reopening and the need to link their fight with the struggles of other workers and parents. A post in the same group about a bus drivers’ walkout in Columbus, Mississippi garnered wide support among teachers who asked how they could support the drivers.

The bus drivers of Columbus Municipal School District (CMSD) refused to drive their routes on Monday, August 24 after being informed of an unexpected cut in their hours and, subsequently, pay. The school district previously contracted drivers through the company Ecco Ride but did not renew the contract after closing down during the pandemic last spring. They instead assembled their own system and hired the drivers directly.

Having already resumed work two weeks earlier, the drivers were notified when they arrived to work on Monday that they would be paid for far fewer hours than expected. Instead of the 30 hours per week that the drivers were promised, they were informed they would only be paid for 18 hours. A CMSD bus driver with up to five years’

experience receives an abysmal annual salary of \$9,720, which is merely \$12 per hour based on the new four-day, 18-hour weekly schedule. With their original 30-hour work week, the starting pay would amount to \$9 per hour.

CMSD Board of Trustees President Jason Spears bluntly told the local newspaper, *The Dispatch*, “there was confusion due to the schools reopening plans; we estimated it would be 6 hours per day, but we realized they only drive 4.5 per day. We can’t pay them for hours they don’t work.”

The *World Socialist Website* spoke with drivers taking part in the action. Diana Prince said that despite the district’s claim that the drivers are working fewer hours, they actually have had to take on new, additional work in the context of the pandemic. She noted, “Some buses have mildew and mold. They gave us a spray bottle to sanitize the bus between routes.”

Renarda Dent, another driver, confirmed that they are working more than 4.5 hours per day. “When Ecco Ride was in charge,” she said, “they would do major maintenance to the buses over the summer. Since the district took over, nothing was done to the buses; they just sat there all summer. Some windows don’t close properly, so the moisture and heat got in and mildew grew.” She added that, “we don’t even have a proper mechanic or bus shop anymore. We’re trying to put air into the tires ourselves, without any pressure gauge. We’re not mechanics.”

The conditions on the buses are not safe for the drivers or students. Dent said the temperatures reach over 100 degrees in the warmer months; coupled with wearing a mask, it becomes “almost unbearable.” Although on her particular route students were somewhat able to distance on the bus, with a seat in between each student, she knows of other routes with more kids. As far as personal protective equipment, she was given a single face shield and some extra masks for the kids.

Additionally, drivers are not being informed about known positive cases among students. Prince stated, “We don’t know anything. If someone is positive, we’re not notified. We don’t know anything until word of mouth. We thought we’d get paid holidays and stuff, but they let us know we’re not entitled to any of that.”

Dent seconded, “I only learned of a positive case in the high school when it came on the news. They didn’t tell us anything, didn’t tell us that we may have been exposed and that certain children need to quarantine.” She continued, “There has been so little communication and so much miscommunication from our supervisor and the district. We don’t know what’s going on. It seems like they’re all just winging it.”

Despite at least one bus driver having already recovered from COVID-19 over the summer, the district told them that they were required to pick up all children at the bus stop, including visibly sick children. The drivers are not allowed to take the temperature of the children; it’s up to the schools to decide if and when children should be sent home.

Dent herself is a parent of students in the district who ride the bus. She said that she thinks they opened the schools too soon and “they should shut everything down again until they get the virus under control.” The district has pressured parents and students to return for in-person instruction. Her eldest son, a senior in high school, has played in the band since middle school. “They wouldn’t let him participate this year without going to school in person. If you choose virtual instruction, you’re not allowed to participate in anything.”

Emphasizing the importance of the drivers in the whole system of

education, Prince said, “We are the first and last person the kids see when they go to school. And they [the district] treat us as if we’re irrelevant. We’re not asking for anything extra, just what we were told we were going to get.” She noted that the drivers still do not know what is happening with their pay, saying, “Everyone’s telling us a different story and they’re playing the blame game.”

About 45 percent of the district’s bus drivers participated in the work stoppage and were ordered to return their keys. Dent said they were informed by a late-night text message that they had been terminated but had not received a letter formally stating so.

Many of the drivers had to file for unemployment after the schools shut down last spring and will have to do so again after being locked out of work until further notice. The maximum state unemployment rate is \$235 per week in Mississippi, the lowest in the country. The average is only \$213 per week. The \$600 federal unemployment payment expired a month ago with no indication that the Republicans and Democrats in Congress are working to renew it.

The drivers hope to air their grievances and have a discussion with the local school board on September 8, but there is no guarantee they will be heard. They have to fill out forms to be put on the agenda, but even then the meeting may run out of time before they have spoken.

Although the district claims that it is managing the routes with the loss of nearly half of the drivers, Dent says “there is no way that they can complete all of those routes with the amount of drivers they have left. It’s impossible. They say they have everything covered, but they don’t. Some children get home two hours later than they are supposed to.” With the remaining drivers having to pick up extra routes, social distancing is impossible since they are doubling or tripling the number of kids on board.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2018-2019 school year, the average teacher salary in Mississippi ranked lowest in the country, at \$45,574. Mississippi also ranks in the bottom five states for per-student spending for elementary and secondary education, at \$8,692 per year in 2016, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The struggles of the Mississippi bus drivers over fair pay and safe working conditions must be linked with the broader campaign against the deadly reopening of schools. We call on educators, parents and students to form rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighborhood. The national Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will help guide this work. We call for the immediate closure of all opened schools and nonessential production to stop the spread of the pandemic. All nonessential workers and laid-off workers must be provided with full unemployment benefits and access to free health care.

The key task is to unite the broader working class and prepare for a general strike to halt the reopening of schools and the broader back-to-work campaign. All those who wish to take up this fight should contact us today, sign up for the *WSWS Educators Newsletter*, and attend the national call-in meeting this Saturday to discuss this perspective.



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