

“I think teachers need to organize like they did in West Virginia”

Tennessee governor Bill Lee hails “strong safety measures” in schools amid growing anger from teachers

Isaac Finn
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On Monday, Tennessee Republican Governor Bill Lee toured Sterchi Elementary School in Knox County and Anderson County High School in a stage-managed event in which he praised “very strong safety measures” for in-person classes. Lee has repeatedly pushed for students to return to classrooms during the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

However, teachers across the state are witnessing a complete failure in terms of safety and social distancing, with many describing conditions where students are seated only “three to four feet apart.”

During his tour, Lee has continued to emphasize the need for in-person instruction, stating, “As we all know, the longer kids are out of classrooms, the more learning loss that occurs.” Lee and Penny Schwinn, the state education commissioner, have both cited a study to claim that reading and math proficiency drastically declines as a result of students learning online. However, the study they cite has come under criticism for using pre-pandemic data, and Lee withheld from superintendents the data used in the study until it was publicly released.

Whatever learning loss occurs during online instruction, this social impact pales in comparison to the mass death and suffering that would result from the full reopening of all schools demanded by Lee.

There have already been over 2,000 deaths in Tennessee alone, and over 213,000 deaths across the US. Over 1,000 students and staff are in isolation or quarantine in Knox County Schools, the largest school district in the state to reopen for in-person learning.

There is enormous opposition to the homicidal reopening of schools in Tennessee, across the US and internationally. Reporters from the *World Socialist Web*

Site Educators Newsletter recently spoke with teachers in Knox County about the conditions in the schools and the broader political motivation to reopen schools and businesses. Many teachers have also expressed a disappointment with the Knox County Education Association (KCEA), a local union affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Below are excerpts from interviews with two Knox County teachers, whose names have been removed to protect their anonymity.

An arts teacher that spoke with the WSWS noted that when she first saw conditions in the school she was “shocked.” She said, “During dismissal you have 50 kids lined up, and they are not social distancing. These are young kids and it is only natural that they are trying to play with each other.”

In elementary schools in Knox County, arts, music, technology and gym teachers are known as “encore” teachers, and hold classes with every student in the school. The teacher that spoke with the WSWS said that prior to the pandemic she was teaching 700 kids on a weekly basis, and currently teaches over 450 students in-person and the rest virtual.

She said, “Before school started I tried to redesign my art room to give the students more space, and I am trying to do as many projects outside as possible. But I can’t have 22 kids six feet apart in my classroom. I have not seen a classroom where the students could be six feet apart.

“I think there was a misconception that we would have all this space because so many of the students would be learning online, but that did not happen. We even have some teachers that only teach online classes, but they still

need to come to school and teach in a classroom with just themselves. So the change is not really that dramatic.”

Asked why she thought so many states are moving forward with school reopenings, she added, “I think COVID pulled up the curtain about public education. The school reopenings are part of reopening the economy, and not about providing kids with an education.

“I would have hoped that businesses would help their employees and the community, and work to provide a space for kids to learn online. Businesses should have allowed their employees that could work from home to do that.

“I think teachers need to organize like they did in West Virginia [during the 2018 teachers strike], but it is difficult because of how demanding this job is. But, we are both right-to-work states, and they were able to accomplish something.

“I have tried to contact the KCEA, but every time we talk they say they don’t want to lose their seat at the table and that they are focusing on different things. I think they are acting much weaker than they need to.”

A teacher and parent in Knox County expressed that there is immense pressure on parents to send kids to in-person classes. She explained, “There was one week for parents to decide if they are going to sign their kids up for virtual learning or in-person classes. I was lucky and had a friend who was able to take my kids in. However, a lot of parents were given a week to figure out who would look after their kids if they were attending virtual classes.

“If there was support for parents, teachers would have more support. This is an extremely difficult time for parents. They are thinking ‘I have to pay my mortgage, I have to pay my bills.’ And, they can’t just leave a kindergartner at home while they go to work at McDonald’s.”

Asked about the situation teachers are facing in the schools, she explained, “At the start of the year we were given three weeks of planning, which was mostly focused on learning the virtual platform. Even for virtual classes, teachers need to be in the building. So, we are teaching one or two virtual classes and then having an in-person class.

“When school started, I thought the kids would be six feet apart and 15 in a class. I have 26 kids in a class and they are more like three feet or four feet apart. They are kids, so they are also getting out of their seats and touching. It is human nature for them to want to play.

“I was also told that it is my job to clean my classroom between classes. Do you think I can clean everything in a

room that 27 kids touched in ten minutes? I would need a teaching assistant just to help me clean.

“There has already been one positive COVID case in the school that we know of, but there was no school closure. Two schools in the district have closed. We are now demanding public disclosure of cases in the schools.

“The poor planning makes the school closing inevitable. There is no plan to help students that need it like ESL students, special needs students, or those with poorer backgrounds. I am trying to advocate for more fair and equitable policies in my free time.

“The local union [KCEA] is now calling for all the schools to go virtual. But, over the summer they were completely quiet, which bothers me. We could have been using the time to organize.”

Asked why states across the US are implementing similar policies, she responded, “It is not like capitalism only exists in Tennessee. Parents can’t make safe decisions when they are worried about paying their bills.”

Tennessee teachers and parents are holding discussions to plan the formation of a Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, to coordinate the immense opposition to school reopenings across the state and unify with the broader working class that faces the same deadly conditions. This will be part of an expanding network of rank-and-file committees formed by educators in New York City, Texas, Florida, Los Angeles and Detroit. We urge all Tennessee educators, parents and students that wish to help form and build this committee to send us your contact information today.



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