

Tennessee educators form rank-and-file safety committee to close schools and save lives

Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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Educators across Tennessee have launched the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to unite teachers and education workers with the broader working class against the unsafe reopening of schools and workplaces. Our aim is to mobilize the largest section of workers in a collective action to halt in-person instruction, stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives.

According to official data from the Tennessee Department of Health, there have already been nearly 214,000 COVID-19 cases and over 2,700 deaths in the state, with hundreds of new cases every day. However, these figures underestimate the real spread of the virus since they are unable to take into account individuals who did not receive a COVID-19 test.

While COVID-19 is a highly contagious virus, it is the actions of Republican Governor Bill Lee and the various mayors and boards of education throughout the state that have allowed for the rapid transmission of the virus at schools, workplaces and public spaces. Governor Lee authorized the most unsafe school reopening protocols by signing an executive order in July to allow contact sports.

Lee allowed schools to reopen in-person in August, despite the Tennessee Department of Health reporting at least 2,000 new COVID-19 cases among children ages 5-18 between August 4 and August 18. Teachers were excluded from the decision-making process and were compelled to return to work in overcrowded, poorly ventilated classrooms where social distancing is impossible.

Governor Lee, in alignment with the inhumane recommendations of the Trump administration, has continued to put the lives of students and teachers at risk by endorsing the decision of six Tennessee districts to designate teachers as “essential workers.” The new designation would have teachers stay at work when they are known to have been exposed to COVID-19 but remain asymptomatic, thereby risking the spread of the virus

among students and colleagues. This is a homicidal measure and a violation of human rights, and these designations must be stricken from the law.

Nashville, which opted to delay in-person instruction, has recently announced plans to reopen schools, expressing a complete indifference to widespread concerns among teachers and parents for their safety. Recent polling has shown that only 18 percent of teachers in Metro Nashville Public Schools feel safe returning to in-person classes, and 46 percent of parents surveyed have chosen to keep their kids attending remote classes.

At every turn, teachers and other school workers are forced to risk their lives, while being given no say in the policies around school reopenings or the allocation of funds. When the revised state budget was passed in June, the salary pool for K-12 and high education employees was reduced by \$80 million, meaning that teachers were once again denied a long-awaited 4 percent raise while Governor Lee and other top officials received increases totaling \$794,900.

The formation of our committee is also in response to the failure of the Tennessee Education Association (TEA) to wage any serious struggle against the unsafe reopening of schools. The primary concern of the teachers union is not the health and well-being of educators, parents and students, but rather securing their seat at the table and access to privileges through the extraction of union dues. In contrast, our committee fights unconditionally for the safety and economic security of educators, parents, students and the broader community above all else.

In order to guarantee safe working conditions for everyone and end the exploitative conditions that force parents to choose between sending their kids into dangerous classrooms or being unable to provide food and shelter for their children, we raise the following demands:

- **For the immediate closure of all public, private and charter schools for in-person instruction!** Schools must

remain closed until rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts, can ensure the safety of children, teachers and school employees. Furthermore, all extracurricular sports should be canceled until the pandemic is under control.

- **The immediate elimination of all standardized tests and educator evaluations!** Under the best conditions, standardized tests are arbitrary measurements of student growth and achievement and teacher efficacy. Imposing these tests on students traumatized by the pandemic's disruption of their academic and social routines is simply injurious. A metric based on individualized baseline skills would provide accurate and actionable indicators of student learning and teacher impact as opposed to standardized tests. In the uncertain teaching environment created by the pandemic, teachers are by necessity having to depart from the extensive criteria of the TEAM General Educator Rubric in order to teach in-person while maintaining safety protocols in their classrooms. Teacher evaluations based on pre-pandemic expectations for classroom instruction are fundamentally invalid.

- **Full funding for all public education, internet access and online instruction!** Every student and teacher must be provided with up-to-date digital technology, training and internet access for virtual instruction immediately. In areas with no internet access, school buses with Wi-Fi capability must be provided until broadband is available.

- **Immediate inspection and upgrade of school ventilation systems!** We demand that all schools and buildings be inspected and provided with state-of-the-art ventilation systems prior to any return to in-person learning to make all buildings safe for students and workers.

- **No loss of income for educators who choose to stay home!** Teachers will not lose their position at their school if they decide to remain virtual, and all educators must be provided with unlimited COVID-19 sick leave.

- **Full income protection for parents or caregivers who stay home with their children!** Anyone who is able to work from home, including teachers, must be allowed to do so. Others who must quarantine should be given a basic income until the conditions are safe to return to their workplaces. Additional support for parents who work in health care, logistics or other essential industries must be provided, including through the development of free and safe community learning pods, which allow students to be supervised while attending online learning.

Free speech and protection for whistleblowers, including teachers, students and staff! This is a fundamental human right enshrined in the First Amendment of the US Constitution and must be adhered to unconditionally. Free speech in schools has been upheld by the Supreme Court (*Tinker v. Des Moines*, 1969). Informing the public of unsafe conditions within schools is not “disruptive speech” but a public good and must not be infringed upon by local education agencies or the Tennessee Department of Education.

- **Halt all nonessential production!** All nonessential production must cease until the pandemic is brought under control and gradual phases should be taken to reopen, based on a scientific program of universal testing and contact tracing. Should any cases arise, there must be an immediate reversal of reopenings in order to mitigate the transmission of the virus.

- **End “right-to-work” and all other laws which infringe on our right to organize for our collective defense!** No one should have to make a life-and-death decision to return to work in unsafe conditions to support the continued exploitation of workers for the benefit of the wealthy.

- **For full transparency!** We demand daily reporting to all communities in Tennessee on test results and COVID-19 cases. We also demand that schools report daily cases within each district.

- **The billionaires and corporations must pay for these measures!** These measures are to be paid for by a surcharge on the billionaires—Thomas Frist, Martha Rivers Ingram, Frederick Smith, Brad Kelley, Mason Hawkins and more. We call for the immediate repeal of the corporate tax abatements that have been showered on big business for decades.

We urge all those opposed to the deadly reopening of schools to contact us today to get involved and help build the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as widely as possible to prepare for the coming struggles.



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wsws.org/contact