

Florida school bus driver dies from COVID-19 weeks before her planned retirement

Alex Johnson
18 October 2020

With Florida pressing forward with plans for the reopening of schools for in-person learning, the tragic October 9 death of 66-year-old school bus driver Gail Brusseau in metropolitan Jacksonville has again exposed the homicidal campaign being waged against the working class.

Brusseau had worked as a school bus driver for 26 years and was planning to retire in December. Within three weeks of returning to driving for Clay County School District, Brusseau fell ill with COVID-19. Facing increasingly severe symptoms, she was admitted to an intensive care unit where she entered into a half-comatose state for 31 days. After remaining heavily sedated and deprived of the ability to speak or hear, Brusseau was eventually placed on life support and died. She is survived by four children, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Brusseau is the eighth teacher or school worker reported to have died from COVID-19 in Florida since schools began reopening across the US in late July. She is the second school bus driver in the state to fall victim to the novel coronavirus, after Troyanna Hamm, an Alachua County School bus driver of more than 15 years, died in early August.

As of this writing, there have been 755,020 COVID-19 infections and 15,970 deaths in Florida, nearly all of which were entirely preventable. Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has deliberately sidelined scientists in favor of supporting President Trump's herd immunity policy, including through the unsafe reopening of schools. This produced a massive spike in cases between June and September, with daily new cases beginning to trend upwards once again as more districts resume in-person instruction.

According to a compilation of educator deaths by *Education Week*, at least 44 educators in the US have been publicly reported to have died from COVID-19 since July 25, while The Covid Monitor reports that roughly 66,000 American educators and students have been infected throughout the pandemic. Given the regime of censorship erected by districts, states and the federal government, the true numbers of cases and deaths are undoubtedly much higher.

Bill Brusseau, Gail's husband, told *News4jax* that despite the claim of Clay County officials that the school district has been following COVID-19 guidelines, including cleaning procedures for buses, that these measures have remained substantially inadequate. He said, "She was taken from me because some people don't seem to understand that this COVID thing can hit anybody."

Pointing to the failure of the school district to halt the spread of the disease, Brusseau said that everyone should be "in this together not just to protect ourselves, but to protect each other. That didn't happen here and that's how she got it."

Asked if he believed Gail would still be alive had she retired earlier and not returned to work, Bill responded, "absolutely," adding, "knowing what was going on in the country, in our state, in our cities, in Jacksonville... I begged her to retire and she said, 'No I'll go one more year.'" Bill ended with the saddened message, "this woman who's laying there, shouldn't be."

The reopening plan for Clay County School District was approved two weeks prior to the August 25 start date for the semester. In an August 6 meeting, Superintendent David Broskie said, "We have met all assurances that are needed to get state approval,"

including social distancing and mask guidelines.

Similar to many school districts across the state, Clay County refused to mandate fully online learning for the district's 38,284 students. The district instead implemented a "hybrid model" which entails partially in-person and partially online instruction. Only 8,621 students have been enrolled in online learning, or roughly 22 percent of the district's total enrollment, meaning that more than three quarters of the student population has been sent back into classrooms.

During the first week of classes in late August, Clay County saw one of the state's largest case number increases with 132 daily new cases and a single-day positivity rate above 12 percent. By mid-September, the school district reported that at least six students and six staff members tested positive for COVID-19 within two weeks of schools reopening, forcing a total of 136 students into quarantine due to exposure to positive cases. By September 17, the number of cases in the district more than doubled to 22.

After a report was released on the new infections, Superintendent Broskie sought to present the data in favorable terms, claiming that the 22 infections represented a low positivity rate and low transmission. What was not taken into consideration, however, is the severe shortage of testing statewide. Throughout the months of August and September, Florida reported a sharp decrease in the number of tests administered, including tests for public school students and faculty.

Infections within school transportation services have not been limited to just Florida. Two weeks ago, the Central Dauphin School District in Harrisburg County, Pennsylvania, one of the largest districts in the state, was forced to suspend its student busing for over a week after a driver tested positive for COVID-19. Central Dauphin Superintendent Norman Miller admitted to parents that the driver "may have had close contact" with staff and students. Pennsylvania has reported nearly 181,000 positive cases and 8,466 deaths from COVID-19 throughout the pandemic.

Kathy, a school bus driver for 26 years in Pennsylvania and a member of the newly formed Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, expressed her condolences for those who knew Brusseau. Speaking on Brusseau's plan to retire in December, Kathy said, "If I could retire, I'd do it. It's really scary. Even if you don't die, you can have

long-term effects for the rest of your life."

Kathy, who is being compelled to return to work this week, noted that she works for a subcontractor, First Student, which is not doing enough to protect workers. "We've already got two cases among our drivers, even before school starts. The last time I spoke with our shop steward, I asked about barriers or ventilation systems, but they have no answer. The union failed, making only a half-lame effort."

In an astute appraisal of the real driving force behind the demand that teachers and students return to classrooms, Kathy commented, "Big business just wants us back to work. They are capitalist and are only concerned for the bottom line, not people's health and well-being."

In response to the school reopening enacted by Pennsylvania Democratic Governor Tom Wolf and facilitated by the teachers unions, bus drivers, educators, and other school workers announced last week the formation of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. They are fighting for numerous demands, including the immediate suspension of face-to-face learning in all school institutions, full transparency about COVID-19 positive tests, and no loss of income for educators who choose to stay home.

A similar committee has been formed in Duval County, Florida, just north of Clay County, to organize opposition to in-person instruction and ensure the safety and well-being of educators and the entire working class.

The central task facing educators and school workers is to form a network of rank-and-file safety committees that are independent of the unions and both corporate parties, to prepare for a nationwide general strike and put an end to the campaign to reopen schools. We urge all Florida educators interested in taking up this fight to sign up for the WWSWS Educators Newsletters and to contact us today to join or found a rank-and-file safety committee in your district or state.



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact