

“They are messing with a sleeping giant”

Alabama teacher speaks out against unsafe conditions and schools reopening

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The coronavirus pandemic continues to spread throughout Alabama, with the past two weeks seeing roughly 1,600 new cases per day and a test positivity rate of 22.6 percent. Since the start of the pandemic, 198,000 people have been infected and 3,006 have died.

Under these conditions, educators are increasingly enraged at the perilous conditions in which they are forced to work, risking their lives and those of their students and families. In Montgomery, 165 teachers refused to work on October 13, the first day that students returned to the classroom, with many staging a protest outside the school district’s central office. Montgomery County has had the fourth-highest number of cases in the state with 10,889, and the third-highest number of deaths at 211.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a middle school teacher who participated in last month’s protest. She wished to remain anonymous to avoid retaliation.

“For the first nine weeks, the students were all virtual but they still forced us to be in the classroom. And they wouldn’t let us bring our own children, either. One of my coworkers had to spend \$400 a month for childcare while she sat in an empty classroom. We feel like we haven’t been given any choice.

“Now, more than two thirds of the kids are still learning from home. We have no more than four students in the classroom. There’s no reason for us to be at the building. We are safer at home. We’re reading the papers everyday. We know the virus is spread by what we are doing. Why can’t we work from home? That’s what we were doing back in the spring when this first started. Now the pandemic is a lot worse but we’re forced to come in. These are the cruelest measures I’ve ever seen.”

She noted that the conditions in her building were unsafe even before the pandemic, stating, “The school is in terrible condition. Leaky tiles. We have a problem with mold, mildew, poor air quality and ventilation. We’ve had it for years, but recently found out that one of the school’s

strategies for saving money was turning the air off. That creates moisture in the tiles and creates an atmosphere for mold. That’s what our buildings are plagued with. If the school has a systemic approach to cleaning, we’re not aware of it.”

She continued, “We had a case of COVID in the school. Even if you have just one person infected in the building, but you have poor ventilation, it’s going to spread.” Later, two employees were suspected to have the virus and were quarantined.

The Alabama Department of Public Health launched an online dashboard last week to publish COVID-19 cases in public schools. In just the first week of collecting this data, there were 722 confirmed cases. However, about half of the districts in the state did not submit reports for that week, including Montgomery and other large districts such as Mobile and Birmingham. All districts will be required to submit reports going forward, and the figures will undoubtedly be staggering.

The victims of the deadly policy of reopening schools need not ever enter a school building. A recent article in the *Alabama Political Reporter* described the devastating experience of two teachers who, after contracting the virus at school, spread it to their elderly parents, for whom they were the primary caretakers, who then died from the disease. One of the teachers noted that she had “no choice whatsoever” in returning to school, being offered no accommodations from the school. Despite trying to limit contact with her father, she believes she spread it to him while she was pre-symptomatic.

The Montgomery teacher concurred that she and her colleagues have similarly been denied any accommodations due to age, underlying conditions or being caretakers for compromised family members. She noted, “We have a lot of teachers who submitted letters from their physicians, who’ve requested to work from home. My physician wrote a letter saying that I was at high risk for complications or even

death from COVID due to underlying conditions and age. They told me I could take medical leave or use sick time. But what about teachers who have used up all their sick time?”

In addition to risking their lives, the teachers were confronted with the sudden burden of teaching two separate lessons at once. During the first quarter, all students were learning from home and receiving the same instruction. The school had assured teachers that when students returned to the classroom, they would continue to receive instruction from their computers so that the teachers could continue with the single lesson plan and maintain distance from students’ desks. But when students arrived, their school-supplied laptops were taken back and the teachers were warned that using the technology for in-person students was against the rules.

Speaking on the impact the pandemic is having on her students, she said, “I think it’s probably draining on them because this has gone on for so long. Some are trying to continue to do school work but I know it’s become very taxing to them, staying at home. Home life hasn’t always been the safest place for a lot of students. That it has taken so long to address this very serious problem, it’s caused unnecessary strain on teachers and children.”

As for the teachers, they are both infuriated and perplexed by the situation. She commented, “Teachers are so thrown off, because if you think about it, we have a plan for every single thing. From the time the kids get off the bus, to a plan for a fire, a thunderstorm, an intruder, a plan for everything. We’ve always had to put the children first. Now we don’t understand. You don’t even have a plan to give us? What are we supposed to do if this or that happens? That’s the most upsetting thing, there’s no sustainable plan.

“Nothing has been centralized. There’s no leadership. The governor passed it on to the state superintendent, who passed it on to the district superintendents, who passed it on to the principals.”

She noted that the local Alabama Education Association (AEA) has also left the teachers to fight for themselves, saying, “They told us to stop acting as a group, to turn in complaints one by one, and that’s how they’d help us. They’ve just broken up our momentum and the power of group consciousness. That’s how they stop us.”

Remarking on the brave initiative that she and her colleagues mounted, independently of the AEA’s involvement, she said, “165 teachers told the Board of Education we’re not going to work. This is the first time we had that courage. It was unheard of, no one had ever stepped out like that. We won’t be bullied anymore. Our lives are on the line.”

The AEA issued an empty statement following the protest,

saying that it is “aware of the frustration” and falsely claiming that it has and continues to put the safety of educators and students first. The statement claims that the legal department is “prepared to file litigation against systems that are not in compliance with reopening plans and guidelines.” No such lawsuit has been filed.

The underlying motive compelling the international drive to reopen schools and nonessential workplaces is the financial interests of the ruling class, which has no qualms about sacrificing human life, even children’s lives, if it advances the accumulation of profit. Last week alone, 13-year-old Peyton Baumgarth and 20-year-old Bethany Nesbitt, as well as an unnamed kindergartner in Amarillo, Texas, all died of complications from COVID-19.

Summarizing the brewing indignation of workers across the world, the Alabama teacher said, “The working class are the majority. The people in charge are the minority, and they are ruling over us. To them, if we get sick, oh well, we can be replaced with someone else. We are resentful but also very bold. They are messing with a sleeping giant.”

Teachers must draw the necessary conclusions to arm themselves in the fight against the reopening of schools. Only through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees that are independent of the corporatist unions and both big business parties will educators be able to mount a serious struggle to close schools and stop the spread of the pandemic. Educators, parents and students must reach across industries and unite all workers against the homicidal drive to reopen the economy during a pandemic that governments all over the world have allowed to spiral out of control.

We call on teachers, school employees, parents and all workers who are committed to the fight against the deadly reopening of schools to join the Educator’s Rank-and-File Safety Committee today and help build a committee in your area.



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