

“We’ve got to take matters into our own hands”

Victimized “Teachers Against Dying” Facebook group founder discusses the struggle facing educators

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Michael Hull, the founder of the Facebook group “Teachers Against Dying,” recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions facing educators and the growing opposition to in-person learning amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

Until last week, Michael taught 8th grade US History in Texas, but he has been forced to resign from his position due to growing pressures from his school district to return to teaching in-person. Michael has only one kidney and is therefore at risk of facing severe complications or possibly dying were he to contract COVID-19. He is also a caretaker for his sister and lives with an elderly person, who he refused to endanger by returning to the classroom.

Texas has the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases of any US state at 1,093,645, and the second highest number of deaths at 20,075. The reopening of K-12 schools throughout the state has been an unmitigated disaster, leading to nearly 40,000 confirmed cases among students and staff.

“We’re one of the worst places in the world. El Paso has trucks with cadavers,” Michael said. “The pandemic is here, it’s not going anywhere. When we opened up bars and restaurants here, you saw a huge spike in the caseload. They’re actively working to suppress the information. We had a website where you could see the number of cases and deaths, but then one day they were gone. Trump is promoting this policy, which is characteristic of a dictator.”

Describing his experience as a teacher during the pandemic, Michael said, “Last spring the schools shut down, and I was helping other teachers get used to online teaching. Over the summer, they announced they would be reopening amid a raging pandemic. It seemed strange, because they shut down in March when there were very few cases. I called the principal and assistant principal, and my mentor teacher, to let them know my situation and that I didn’t have any intention of going back in person. I also expressed that I thought people should have a choice.

“My doctor wrote me a note which strongly recommended that I don’t return. I asked my district if there was a virtual position, and initially they declined. Then they asked me to wait, and finally they offered me a virtual position, but I’d have to come into the building in-person. I declined, and eventually they gave me a virtual position.”

At the same time, Michael followed the rapid growth of Facebook groups organized by Texas teachers in opposition to school reopenings. By the end of July, Texas had three large groups with a

combined membership of 63,400 members, part of a broader nationwide upsurge of opposition. However, Michael felt that the groups in Texas began to “normalize” the pandemic and the policies of reopening schools, prompting him to found Teachers Against Dying.

Commenting on his group, Michael said, “Teachers Against Dying was inspired by the idea that we shouldn’t normalize this situation. It’s not normal to go back to schools with face shields, it’s insane. At first it was just me starting this group, I didn’t think that much of it. It was like a protest. As it grew, I wanted to focus the group more on activism.”

A few weeks ago, Michael was accused by his district’s Human Resources division of organizing his coworkers online, which is not allowed in Texas, among the most anti-democratic right-to-work states in the US.

He noted, “I received this phone call and email from Human Resources interrogating me, which came on the exact same day I was approved to work from home. I’ve never had a problem with discipline at work, and now I was under the microscope, it was obviously retaliatory. Within weeks, they told me to go back in-person to ‘support the kids,’ which was obviously not the real reason because many of the kids lack the necessary technology to learn under the hybrid model.

“A short time later, they said my virtual position was expired, so I had to go on FMLA. They cut me off from my emails, materials, Google Classroom, during the middle of a class, which also made me miss an annual review dismissal meeting for one of my special education students. They said I was there to support the kids, but now they don’t even have a teacher. I got called by the Vice Principal, who said she needed to ‘make a decision, this is a business.’”

Michael resigned from his teaching position on November 6. He described the impetus for making this decision: “I was on emergency leave, and could have continued using FMLA, but I figured I wouldn’t get paid any way. I know if I left and was on FMLA, they couldn’t hire another teacher, which would increase my co-teacher’s workload. The kids also need a certified teacher, especially in a tested core subject like history. I put more thought into the well-being of staff and kids than the people in charge.”

Now that he is unemployed, Michael wants to dedicate himself to helping teachers and other workers to stop the spread of the pandemic.

In particular, he points to the experience of the 2018 wildcat teachers strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma as examples to be followed. During those strikes, thousands of teachers organized themselves independently of the pro-corporate unions, as well as the Democratic and Republican parties, in a powerful movement that spread across the county.

He said, "I look to West Virginia and Oklahoma, because somehow despite all these draconian anti-worker laws they managed to get concessions through collective action. These strikes were done for lesser grievances. If it could be done in these draconian states, it can be done anywhere."

Last week, Michael posted a poll in Teachers Against Dying, posing the question, "Based on the outcome of the 2020 election, do you believe an independent resistance is still necessary to bring about concessions for teachers and the working class?" Roughly 60 percent responded, "Yes. We need to act now. Democrats and unions will likely support us"; roughly 36 percent answered, "Yes, and we should be prepared for Democrats and unions to actively work against us"; and only four percent said "No. Democrats and unions will work on our behalf."

Commenting on the results of this survey, Michael stated, "I think this poll is very reflective of the state of the left in the US. The Democrats and unions have been co-opted by the corporations, and people want to organize independently. If I met with one of the union leaders from the AFT or NEA, they would oppose us. The people really running it are actively against us, in the long run they would try to undermine us. Just like in West Virginia, where they flew in and shut things down, and worst of all they kept it from spreading to other states. Too many people are lost in this fiction that the union will do anything. We have to take things into our own hands."

As a history teacher, Michael has followed political developments closely. He is opposed to the Trump administration's attempts to repudiate the results of the November election. He said, "The right is really insulating itself from objective reality, and it's frightening. It's Orwellian. Will it result in some type of hostile take-to-the-streets militarism? That's hard to say, but it's frightening. The statements from Mike Pompeo that they're preparing for a second Trump term are incredible. I've always thought he was a very dangerous person. He's very dubious.

"Trump has these unmarked vehicles in the street, abducting people protesting, but the Democrats have enabled this. They voted for the PATRIOT Act, voted for unending wars. They bailed out Wall Street and sided with the banks. Under Obama, they took us up to seven foreign conflicts in the Middle East. They do nothing substantive, it's all theater. They've passed all of Trump's legislative agenda, and haven't done anything meaningful, and because of that they've enabled Trump's stoking of the far-right. I blame them, I think they're culpable in a lot of this."

"The idea of reforming the Democrats from within, I think it's a pipe-dream. When Biden says he's going to work as hard for the Republicans as the Democrats, to me that means he's going to do nothing. If Biden gets in for four years and he does nothing, the right could have a more cunning demagogue, a combination of Pence and Trump, I think that's what's most frightening."

Speaking on the conceptions behind Teachers Against Dying during the course of the pandemic, Michael said, "The group started as a minor protest, and then it grew. It became a sounding board for people to vent their protests, let them know they're not alone. Now that time has passed, I've read stories of people becoming infected, people

dying, being forced out of education. How many good teachers are we losing to this? All the deaths and long-term illnesses are unnecessary.

"The schools have become day-cares for the employees of the billionaire class who already got the bulk of the CARES Act, and now we have to subsidize the rest of their lives. They're deriving every benefit, but they're not providing anything. This is all about promoting the financial interests of the elite, it's all about the interests of the ruling class who control politics.

"They try to divide up the working class on social issues, it works very well in destroying our solidarity and action. There's a lot of anger in our country, and we have to rethink how we'll organize. I agree that this situation is explosive and systemic. Trade unions aren't working, we have to get something universal. I do like the idea of rank-and-file committees, it seems like they're trying to do something.

"When we're in this mass class struggle, the unions are disarmed, emasculated, they can't do anything. A lot of teachers I talk to say 'we are the unions.' Maybe the unions will file a lawsuit when we're all dead, but I don't see them stopping it. We've got to take matters into our own hands, we've got to do what they did in West Virginia and Oklahoma, and fight against this oppressor.

"The time for caravan protests is over, the time for carrying signs is over. We've got to do something serious, and I would be honored to do whatever I can do to help with this. What good is it to have this group if it's not channeling it into something more progressive? I've lost my job, I got forced out, and now I feel obligated to fight for my profession. Too many people are getting forced out, too many are dying, and the sickening thing is how much it was preventable. There has to be an urgency. The Democrats aren't acting, the unions aren't acting. I really want a solid workers movement, not just teachers but everybody, to fight for our rights. What do we even have to lose at this point?"

The WSWS provides a voice of opposition for educators and the entire working class to the homicidal policies of opening workplaces and schools during the raging COVID-19 pandemic. We urge all educators, parents and students opposed to in-person learning to contact us today to share your story.



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