

“They want to silence me for telling the truth.”

Montgomery, Alabama teachers report on hostile and unsafe working conditions

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This week, the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that 1.04 million children in the United States have been infected with COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic, 11.5 percent of all cases in the country. From August 20 to November 12, as schools across the country reopened, cases among children rose by 135 percent. There is no question that the reopening of schools since August has led to the disease spreading out of control among children, educators and communities at large.

This nationwide and international trend has found sharp expression in Alabama, whose K-12 COVID-19 School Dashboard has recorded thousands of cases in the state’s public schools. On the week ending November 13, there were 1,592 cases, up 536 from the week prior, which logged 1,056 cases, with most districts across the state now reporting cases.

Schools across Alabama have been forced to transition temporarily back to remote learning after outbreaks, including schools in Blount, Pickens, Tuscumbia and Jefferson counties. Two districts shifted every school to remote learning after their case numbers doubled over the span of a week—Marshall County and Alexander City. Mobile County, the largest school district in the state, also reported a more than two-fold increase in cases since the prior week.

In Tuscaloosa, the district announced an “unprecedented number of absences” within the transportation department and that the remaining bus drivers would have to double or triple their routes, causing crowded buses and delays in pick up and drop off times.

Though the numbers available reveal a dire situation, the consensus among teachers in Montgomery is that they are an under-count. “I believe they’re lying or fudging the statistics,” one teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, while another stated, “Last week Montgomery reported 36 cases, but they’re not being honest.”

The WSWs spoke to three teachers in Montgomery about their working conditions, the spread of the virus in the schools, and the role of the unions. These teachers plan to join others in Montgomery to hold a rally Friday to raise support for remote learning. Their names have been changed to protect them from retaliation by the district.

WSWS: What are the conditions like in your school?

Melissa: As far as teachers, we are doing two jobs in one—teaching virtually and in-person. It’s very stressful. There is no extra pay, no hazard pay, and teachers get no answers to their questions regarding the pandemic. It’s a hostile work environment.

Melanie: Several teachers on my hall, we built our own bubbles, which we purchased with our own money. We bought PVC pipes and hung clear shower curtains all around us. It’s interesting that the

nurse’s station and offices have Plexiglas, but not us. The district only gave one bag of PPE for the year. In the Superintendent’s letter, it said this is a one-time bag. We received only one face shield, two disposable masks, one pair of gloves, one pack of wipes, one bottle of spray, one roll of paper towels.

Erica: I have mold in my classroom. I’ve tried to paint over it with white paint. We just had our roof fixed last year. Every time it would rain there would be puddles in my classroom. It made my white board bubble up. The floor is stained with mold. A year or two ago I started getting migraines. Someone said it might be because of the mold in my classroom. I tried to keep my door open. We don’t have central air in our building. My classroom has a little air conditioner that they just put in, but a lot of classes don’t even have that. We have no hot water. The boys bathroom doesn’t even have doors on the stalls.

WSWS: How has the reopening affected you and your students emotionally?

Melissa: Discussion on the pandemic is a daily thing. Students talk and don’t want to be here. One student had an anxiety attack. When she was in the classroom, she thought she was literally going to die, saying she was deathly afraid of the virus. She has not been back since.

Erica: You get to the point where you’re depressed, afraid. I was afraid for my parents, who are in their 70s. We stayed away from each other. If I had to go to Walmart, I would social distance from them for two weeks. I would watch the news so much and would get depressed and my anxiety would go up.

Melanie: I want people to know how some teachers’ kids are failing. We have to be at school while our own kids are at home alone. Kids that were in magnet school can’t handle it alone and have to go back to traditional school, because they don’t have that extra help from their parents. Teachers’ kids aren’t doing as well as they normally would. By the time we get home, we’re exhausted from the day.

WSWS: Were any virtual accommodations made for teachers with underlying health conditions or who are caretakers for elderly or ill relatives?

Erica: I have a coworker who has diabetes who needs to be home, and I respect that. That’s what I’m working and fighting for, to let them work from home. It’s not even a lot of kids at the school. The kids are getting the virus and the parents are switching them to virtual, but we are still here.

Melanie: The only option was to take medical leave. That would be two-thirds of your pay and you had to prove someone from your

household needed you. That wasn't an option for me. ... The district personnel report came out recently. It was full of resignations and retirements, more than I'd ever seen.

WSWS: How has the workload changed this year?

Melanie: It's a lot. We were given the program Schoology just four days before school started. We had to learn it and then use it. That was difficult, even just knowing the settings and how to stop the emails and notifications coming all hours of the day and night. There have been no pay raises and they're asking for us to do even more things. I'm teaching face-to-face and virtual at the same time. It's like I'm constantly watching a tennis match, looking at the computer then looking at the kids in-person.

Erica: I have a smart-board/white board, but it doesn't have a camera, webcam, or sound for the students to hear me. I have to sit there in the middle of the class. With teaching hybrid, I'm talking to the laptop and to my students at the same time, and they expect me to teach them both ways without having any training.

WSWS: How is your school handling positive COVID-19 cases, in terms of informing teachers and parents, enforcing quarantining, etc.?

Melissa: Two students had COVID-19 without anyone else knowing. Since the tests didn't come back positive in time, the "all clear" was given to the students. The principal said they would only inform us if a student tested positive. We're also not allowed to mention if students were under quarantine. Only if the school nurse verifies positive cases do we know if someone has it. If you quarantine, you have 10 days specifically for that, but once you're out, you must use sick days.

Melanie: I was supposed to be in quarantine for 14 days, but the school called on the ninth day and said I was clear to come back. They didn't ask me to get tested; I did that on my own.

Erica: We have a school worker who was supposed to be in quarantine, but she came back to work early because she is scheduled to have surgery, and if she quarantines for 14 days she won't have any sick days left for her surgery. They made a janitor come back to the school even though he had the virus but was asymptomatic. People are running out of sick days to quarantine.

WSWS: Have you faced any retaliation from your school or district for speaking out against the reopening?

Erica: Because I spoke out, my principal reprimanded me and wrote me a letter about saying things on social media, even though I never signed a letter on social media policy. I want to know the protocol when it comes to teachers and students quarantining. They didn't give us a clear plan. I asked what is the protocol? I asked how do you get in touch with HR? They don't answer the phone. They want to silence me for telling the students the truth. At first, they were saying the people next to that teacher have to quarantine, not the whole class. Now they have changed the policy. In the meantime I got written up for it. It's a hostile environment.

WSWS: Have the Alabama Educators Association (AEA) or the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA) offered any assistance or fought the reopening?

Melissa: We feel abandoned. We have no support from them. I believe they're working in cahoots with central office. We're paying dues and yet have no support. We're just not getting it. Even with school conditions with dilapidated buildings! The union is on the side of Montgomery Public School system, not us.

Erica: The morale among teachers is very low. We feel like, what can we do? Our organization, AEA, is not helping us in any kind of way. All they say is "file a grievance." That's why we're taking it

into our own hands to do something.

Melanie: I'm a member, but I don't see anything that they've done significant enough to make a difference. I don't know if it's because what they say falls on deaf ears or because they haven't said anything at all.

WSWS: What do you think about the back-to-school and back-to-work campaigns more broadly?

Melissa: The teaching profession is not as respected as it used to be. When the pandemic hit, teachers were decided by the government to become "essential workers," placing the stability of the economy on the backs of teachers. If the teachers go back to work, all the factory workers and retail workers can go back to work. The teachers are considered babysitters. We teachers are not treated as human beings anymore. The unions and MPS treat us as robots. They don't care. Our feelings don't matter, our health doesn't matter, and our families don't matter.

Educators and the entire working class face the false choice of sacrificing their health and lives, or sacrificing their economic livelihood. This choice is predicated on the bipartisan policy of the ruling class that no matter the cost to human life, a temporary shutdown must not be implemented, as this would inhibit the profit accumulation of the ultra-rich.

The Democratic Party, represented by the president-elect Joseph Biden, made clear that it would continue the same fundamental policy of the Trump administration—keep businesses and schools open. When epidemiologist Michael Osterholm, a member of Biden's coronavirus task force, suggested a four-to-six-week shutdown, coupled with full income for all affected workers, there was an immediate sell-off on Wall Street followed by an explicit disavowal of Osterholm's statement by the Biden team.

As the teachers in Montgomery have attested to, the unions at the local, state and national levels have worked hand-in-hand with the politicians and corporations to keep workers and teachers in the factories and schools. To take the necessary action, teachers and all workers need new organizations, independent of the unions, to build up support for walkouts and a general strike to halt all nonessential production.

Teachers, autoworkers and other workers are building a network of rank-and-file safety committees to coordinate this fight. We urge all educators, parents and students to sign up to join and help build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, and to found a local or statewide committee where you live.



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