

“All workers need to come together”

Montgomery, Alabama educators hold protest at State Capitol to demand school closures

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Teachers from the Alabama state capital of Montgomery held a “Safer at Home” rally Friday morning on the steps of the Capitol building to demand the shutdown of schools. The name of the rally is an ironic reference to the “Safer at Home” stay-at-home order issued by Governor Kay Ivey that leaves schools and factories open during the pandemic.

Around 25 educators were present and about 20 more participated virtually. As multiple speakers noted, more would have participated had they not already run out of sick time, been actively in quarantine, or feared risking their jobs.

“No Plan No Personnel,” the group that organized the event independently of the teachers unions, previously organized a protest on the first day of in-person teaching on October 13. Teachers refused to return to work that first day, with many continuing the protest into the following week.

One of the worst-hit cities in Alabama, Montgomery has had 11,903 cases and 232 deaths since the pandemic began. According to the state’s K-12 COVID-19 School Dashboard, there were 38 confirmed cases in the school district this week alone. There were 2,261 cases statewide, up 42 percent from last week’s total of 1,592.

Speakers at the rally described unsafe working conditions, the indifference of school board and school administrators, the emotional crisis faced by children and intimidation by school administrators.

Not only teachers but all school workers faced the same conditions, said Tynisa Williams. “The custodians are being put in these situations, with no medical coverage. Now one of them is fighting for his life. One of the bus drivers complained, and then his

contract didn’t get renewed. This is retaliation. They’re blaming us for even asking, ‘Can we do this another way?’”

Despite teachers being out of the classrooms from March until August, the district did not inform them of the new software they would be using until days before school started, Williams added. “They have no plan, no training. Just expectations.” When she referred to the one-time bag of personal protective equipment given to teachers in the district that was supposed to last the entire school year, the crowd shouted back: “It’s gone! Gone!”

A parent spoke in support and solidarity with the teachers. “I have so much respect for you. Y’all are trying to teach face-to-face, then jump on Zoom, and you have your own families, too. That is a lot. It’s hard. I don’t know how you do it. The message they’re sending is that ‘it’s safer [for the kids] at home, but it’s more important, their grades and school are more important than their health.’ Well, if they die from COVID, that’s not helping with the education. So, we need everybody out here.”

Teacher Natalia Wright rejected the attempt by politicians and school administrators to pit teachers and parents against each other and emphasized that all workers share the same interests. “[The pandemic] has not only touched the lives of people here in Montgomery but all over the world. This is global. Now, because employers basically need parents to return to work, and parents are having to go to work to continue their livelihood, so it looks like we’re in a fight pitted against each other. That shouldn’t be! We are on the same team, fighting for the same thing, parents and teachers and all workers. Plant workers,

automobile workers, Walmart workers, and Burger King workers—all workers need to come together. Yes, you want your children to go to school so you can go to work, but our government has given trillions of dollars and that needs to go to employees, to provide income security, job security, food security.”

“Wall Street has the money. Our government has allocated trillions; now that money needs to be trickled down to where it belongs, and that is with the people. That is our money, and they need to return it back to us.”

Finally, Wright called for full transparency in the district about the spread of the virus and full protection for whistleblowers. She said teachers are being told not to report if they have COVID and not to discuss it with their coworkers. “Nothing is transparent,” she said.

Montgomery teachers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* earlier this week had similar descriptions of teaching conditions as the protest speakers. One teacher described conditions at her building in which there was mold all over the classroom, no central air conditioning and no doors on the bathroom stalls.

Speaking to the WSWS, another teacher noted the collusion between school districts and the Alabama Education Association (AEA) to reopen schools. “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.” Significantly, the AEA did not even acknowledge the protest on its social media pages.

Among workers, however, there is growing support for a shutdown of schools and nonessential industries to combat the spread of the pandemic. Demonstrations and walkouts continue to build at school districts around the country and the world, and there is growing support among autoworkers for the calls by the Autoworker Rank-and-File Safety Network to close the factories, with full pay guaranteed for workers.

To prepare the way for a nationwide general strike to force a shift to remote-only learning, demand full income and healthcare protections for all workers and bring an end to nonessential production, the *World Socialist Web Site* is helping teachers and other workers

to form a network of independent Rank-and-File Safety Committees that needs to be expanded to all school districts and into all workplaces. Contact us today to join the fight.



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