

Alabama juvenile hall teacher speaks out on hazardous conditions

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As cases of COVID-19 continue to spike worldwide, teachers across the United States have been forced back to work without adequate protection. In Alabama, teachers have become increasingly vocal about their working conditions, staging sickouts and protests even as Republican Governor Kay Ivey vows to keep businesses open as the pandemic spreads deeper throughout the state.

An educator at one of Alabama's juvenile detention facilities, given the pseudonym Kate in this article to protect her identity, recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the deplorable and dangerous conditions she and her students are forced to confront daily.

Kate has been a teacher for 22 years and currently works with the sex offenders unit of an all-boys residence for juvenile offenders. While she says that conditions for teachers have "deteriorated awfully" over the last several years, they have worsened as the coronavirus spread through Alabama. She says that initially, as other facilities and schools began to shut down to slow the spread of the disease, State Superintendent of Education Eric Mackey told administrators at her facility that it would not shut down.

The statement by Mackey was met with a firm and immediate outcry from Kate and other teachers, and the facility was shut down until June. However, the shutdown was used to launch remodels of the school. When Kate returned to work, she was no longer allowed to use her portable classroom. Instead, she was told that she would be teaching in the boys' dorms. She has no desk, no computer, and no phone in the dorms. Whereas she taught 10 students prior to the shutdown, she now teaches 15 students in a dorm room where there is no possibility of social distancing.

With no desk, Kate must now teach in front of a toilet in the boys dorm. A mattress was propped up as a makeshift partition. To make matters worse, the plumbing and sewage systems in the facility are outdated. Sewage often backs up into the showers, and toilets frequently do not flush.

"Sometimes, we have no water," Kate told the WSWs. "We can't wash our hands with no water."

Dorm janitors, she says, are given neither personal protective equipment (PPE) nor adequate cleaning supplies. They receive a single gallon of bleach and a bottle of Pine-Sol monthly, with which they are expected to clean and sanitize an entire dormitory. Faculty and staff are not notified when a child tests positive for the virus. The dorms are shut down for three days, during which there is no technology for virtual learning, and then the teachers go back into the same crowded, unsanitary dormitories to teach.

The school has used the nature of her students' criminal offenses as a pretext for rejecting virtual learning. Faculty were told that because boys could "sneak onto websites," teachers "had better be ready to go to paper and pencils."

Kate and her colleagues complained to their supervisor about the conditions, to which he responded, "If you don't like it, get another job."

After this fruitless discussion, Kate made a call to the Alabama Educators' Association (AEA) of which she is a member. A union bureaucrat told her, "We can't do anything for you."

On its website, the AEA boasts that it is "the member-driven voice of Alabama's education employees." This "voice" has been silent about the safety of its members during the pandemic, and its website does not mention the pandemic even obliquely and makes no demands for PPE or distance learning.

After her conversation with the AEA, Kate says she realized that the union “works hand in hand with the state to keep us in line.”

Her students, she says, are “very anxious,” adding, “If the world ever saw what we are doing to those young men, they would be outraged.”

Kate’s supervisors work to ensure that the world does not see. Teachers at her facility are no longer allowed to carry their phones into their classrooms. Being caught with a phone or a camera on campus results in immediate termination.

The state of Alabama was warned over the summer that plans to reopen schools would likely result in a spike in coronavirus cases. The state proceeded, however, and most districts encouraged virtual students to return to physical classrooms at the end of the first nine-week grading period. The Alabama Board of Education has not standardized sanitation or social distancing policies, nor has it provided teachers with personal protective equipment (PPE). The COVID-19 reporting dashboards for Alabama schools lags by at least a week.

The president of the Alabama Hospital Association reported on November 18 that the virus is “out of control” in the state. The daily average of new cases over the past two weeks has jumped by 50 percent. Educators represent a significant number of these cases, forcing some districts to go strictly to virtual learning.

State Superintendent Mackey recently trivialized these outbreaks, saying that there have been no significant outbreaks among students. Last week, he told reporters, “There comes a point where there are just not enough adults to effectively function and you just have to close school for a couple of weeks.”

Alabama is set to lose almost \$1 billion in federal coronavirus relief funds, which could have been spent improving distance learning or providing PPE to teachers. Instead, state leaders have chosen to use school reopenings to strong arm workers back into unsafe conditions.

Kate and her colleagues are among the many teachers nationwide who are speaking out against the subordination of workers’ health to Wall Street’s wealth. They want a complete switch to virtual learning until the pandemic is over, and for cases where virtual learning is not viable, they want teachers to be given adequate PPE. She says that rank-and-file committees

are a vital part of raising these demands. “I think they’re important,” she says. “I like the structure of them, and the more we learn about them the more we can use them.”

As the WSWs has noted, the coronavirus pandemic represents a “trigger event” in the capitalist crisis, making clear to millions of workers that capitalism thrives upon their abuse and exploitation. The struggle of educators must be united with the struggles of the entire working class, not only in the United States but throughout the world. We call on all educators, parents and students in Alabama who wish to form independent rank-and-file safety committees to fight for their interests to sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety.



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