

“All teachers, plant workers, custodians, we all need to band together to be protected”

Alabama loses two more educators to COVID-19

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Two more beloved educators in the Montgomery, Alabama school district have died of COVID-19. Morris Lewis Pitts, a devoted grandfather and custodian at Jefferson Davis High School, passed away November 25. Dr. Ennis McCorvey, an assistant principal of Lee High School who inspired students and teachers alike, succumbed to the virus November 29, adding to the state’s grim death toll of at least 3,638 people. On November 21, two Hoover City educator deaths were reported.

“Every day, Mr. Pitts was at our school to pick up his granddaughter,” a Montgomery teacher recalled to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “He’d work a full day at the high school, then come and get his granddaughter. Everybody knew him as the man who comes and waits for his baby. He came to parent-teacher conferences or called and asked about her grades. He was the involved parent we all wish for, and he was not a parent but a grandparent. He’d say, ‘She’s a wonderful child, but I’ve still got to be involved.’ He was an amazing person. He would lend a hand to help anybody; he’d give the shirt off his back.”

Dr. McCorvey’s death has likewise traumatized his coworkers and friends. “People were crying, crying in front of their students,” said the teacher. “Students were crying. Graduates of the school said, ‘He helped me, he told me I was going to make it.’ He touched everybody, every school, people in the community, fraternity members, church members. Teachers are still having a hard time; they can’t believe he’s gone.

“He helped me. I had a student who didn’t want to do any work. That young man just refused to take a test. Principal McCorvey said to me, ‘Give him another chance. I don’t care if it’s four or five chances, you cannot give him the option to fail!’ Still this young man said he wouldn’t take the test. He was just rebelling. McCorvey pulled his chair up and said, ‘Young man, you can do this, show them how smart you are. Just do this.’ And he did it. He helped the worst-behaved kids, he pushed them and showed them how great they are.”

The day following Dr. McCorvey’s death, the district belatedly announced that it would end face-to-face instruction districtwide beginning December 7 through January 11. Even this half-measure quickly brought the ire of Republican Governor Kay Ivey. She has repeatedly vowed not to shut businesses, endorsing the Business Council of Alabama’s (BCA) “Keep Alabama Open” campaign. The BCA is made up of the top financial interests in the state, including the Alabama Automotive Manufacturers Association, US Steel,

Honda, JP Morgan Chase, and other banks and large businesses.

With the two latest COVID-19 victims not yet buried, Ivey issued a statement demanding that students return to the classrooms as soon as possible. Notably, her December 1 statement emphasized “our employers ... deserve nothing less.”

While callously referring to coronavirus and the unnecessary deaths of educators and workers as “extremely challenging,” Ivey hypocritically claimed that in-person learning was essential to prevent “students from regressing academically.” She concluded with the lie promoted by Trump, Biden, the corporate media, and the teachers unions that “students are safe in the classroom with strong health protocols.”

The pandemic is raging out of control in Alabama. In the last five days, there have been over 3,000 cases each day, pushing the rolling 7-day average to a record 3,228. Hospitalizations, presently at 1,801, are also breaking records. As of December 1, there were no more ICU beds available in the city of Mobile. With a 32 percent test positivity rate across the state, indicating large numbers of undetected cases, health officials are predicting a deepening “tidal wave.”

The Montgomery teacher commented angrily, “I believe the politicians are being pressured by big business. They claim schools which are open are doing okay, but we have teachers on the inside and we know there are cases.

“A teacher in North Alabama, after just three weeks of going to work, got COVID-19. She was taking care of her mom, who then got COVID-19 and died. This is what face-to-face instruction means. She said, ‘How can I live with the fact that because I returned to work, my mother is gone? How can I forgive myself?’”

The teacher added, “Until we have a plan to keep people safe, teachers, students, and families, we should not be in buildings. Cases are so high, it is staggering. Legislators are at home, quarantining. But teachers are being shamed and not allowed to work from home. We are going into the buildings and teaching remotely. We have asked, since August, if we could teach from home, but we get a hardline ‘no.’ Even with at-risk parents at home, there is no option to teach from home.

“The politicians and money run everything. How many more people have to die? The governor and big-business people sit at home and dictate to us what to do. They figure if schools are closed, then employers will have to pay people for staying at home.” Noting the

priorities of the Trump administration, she added, “This is the first president to have the stock market ticker tape running during his press conferences.”

Other educators are angrily posting on social media that the unions have done nothing to defend teachers. One commented, “Where are our AEA/MCEA Reps & Uniserve Directors? Why aren’t they advocating for us teachers? If not, when can we unenroll? If ever we needed them the time is now! How many people need to contract and die from COVID-19 before we are remote/virtual?”

The Montgomery educator who spoke with the WSWs emphasized that dilapidated buildings are causing severe health problems for staff and students and are facilitating the spread of COVID-19. She reports asthma, epilepsy, severe allergies and strokes among her coworkers. She said they have complained to the governor, the mayor, and the school district about mold, poor indoor air quality and unsafe schools, documenting the crisis with photos. Instead of fixing the buildings, the politicians turned the material into a commercial to urge workers to vote for increased property taxes, a regressive measure.

She stated: “My building is about 37-38 years old, and it’s not the worst. We have the original carpet, the original air ducts. There is literally mold in our air ducts being blown onto us. A colleague had mold growing in her office. She ended up having three strokes and passing out. The district called it a ‘severe allergy,’ as if that much mold is okay.

“Another coworker was hospitalized for four months for another severe condition caused by the building. They refused to pay her leave pay. When she went to the union, they didn’t help her. The school board gives the unions free access to buildings, so they can sign everybody up. They get free rein, so they can push ‘protection.’ But the union goes to the school board to ask questions before they see to us. That’s a conflict of interest; they serve the school board, not us.

“The librarian at our school has a binder three inches thick full of documentation. She has to go to the hospital to get steroid shots, medications, and breathing treatments. She paid for her own air quality treatment and they found that the school needed to remove the old carpet. But the district said, ‘Who is going to pay for that?’ She transferred to another school, and since that time she has not been sick for one day.

“We have mold, black dust blowing out of air vents. There is drywall cracking and popping out in the floor. The ceiling tiles are gray, full of moisture. We had bats one year, and the exterminator patched the roof but didn’t clear the bats out. They had no place to go but down into the building. They were in our classrooms, flying up and down our hallway. Our students were literally running from the bats in the hallway. Then there are snakes. Our veteran custodian gets calls to kill the snakes. Mice are everywhere, rampant in the building. I can hear them in the walls.

“Last year we had no toilet paper or soap for the first month of school. The district said it was ‘back-ordered.’ We had to ask parents to bring toilet paper. This is child abuse and endangerment.”

The teacher urged Montgomery teachers and parent to attend an upcoming school board meeting this Tuesday and demand the right of all educators to work virtually, for an accounting of CARES Act funds spent by the district, and for teacher participation in the reopening policies.

“The reason we wear red shirts is to symbolize that teachers’ lives are on the line. We began it to symbolize our blood, but unfortunately our symbol has come to life. It’s big business. It’s money over lives. Now we have our dead.

“All teachers, the plant workers, the custodians, we all need to band together to be protected. If we shut down, the city shuts down. People need to realize that we have more power than we think. We need to work together because they are pitting us against each other just so they can make money.”

Emphasizing the history of struggle in Alabama, site of the famous Montgomery bus boycott during the Civil Rights Movement, the teacher concluded, “My parents were protesters. My mom was in the integration fight, in middle and high school. She always taught me to stand up for what we believe in.

“My grandparents’ house is on 16th Street in Birmingham and my uncle went to school with one of those four little girls [who were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in 1963]. My uncle and aunties remember that day. How do you bomb a church? We still see the evidence of those days. I remember going through the streets and suddenly seeing steps which go up to nothing. Those were houses that were bombed. This struggle today is part of Alabama. It doesn’t stop. There is no money to fix schools, yet they build three private prisons.

“The people are getting the courage to stand up. People might have been going along with the status quo, thankful for having a job, but now we’re seeing it. They now realize their lives are on the line.”

The WSWs and Socialist Equality Party urge all Alabama teachers to draw the lessons from the political experiences of the past year, which show unequivocally that both Democratic and Republican politicians, as well as their backers in the unions, are wholly subservient to Wall Street and are enforcing the reopening of schools and nonessential workplaces.

Educators, parents and workers must take matters into our own hands to halt the homicidal policies of the ruling class. We urge all readers to sign up here to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and begin the fight to turn out to the entire working class, including Hyundai and Honda workers, Walmart workers, Amazon and other logistics workers, and healthcare workers in Alabama, across the US and internationally, in a common fight in defense of life and against the profit system which benefits only the ruling elites.



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