

One week after wildcat sickout strike, South Carolina teacher dies from COVID-19

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On Saturday, December 5, third-grade teacher Staci Blakely died from COVID-19 in Lexington County, South Carolina. Blakely was 50 years old and had taught for 28 years, and she leaves behind her husband and two daughters. Despite this tragic death, the school and district remain open for in-person learning.

An online message from the principal at Carolina Springs Elementary, where Blakely taught, disingenuously states that the 2020–2021 school year would “be the best year ever for our students.” The counselors and psychologists who have been sent to the school following Blakely’s death no doubt find the reality to be the opposite for themselves and the children whom she taught.

The district’s COVID-19 Dashboard shows there are currently 71 active, confirmed cases among staff and students, with 636 individuals who are either exhibiting symptoms or have been exposed to a known case.

Blakely’s death follows that of 28-year-old teacher Demi Bannister in South Carolina in September. Infections throughout the state have skyrocketed as a direct consequence of the reopening of schools and businesses. On Saturday, a record 2,715 new positive cases were announced, along with 92 probable cases, surpassing Friday’s record of 2,470 new cases. The positivity rate now stands above 20 percent, suggesting that the true prevalence of COVID-19 in the population is even higher than the record number of positive test results would suggest.

In the neighboring district, Lexington School District 2, more than 40 staff—including teachers, administrators and support staff—at Brookland-Cayce High School and Airport High School conducted a wildcat sickout strike for multiple days last week in protest of the district’s transition to in-person instruction five days per week.

A teacher in the district told local *WLTX News19*,

“With bringing everybody back five days, the big concern is social distancing. We’re just not able to do it. Our class sizes with everybody there, it’s impossible.” Educators in the district report class sizes as large as 32 students.

Last Tuesday, Dec. 1, 139 teachers also conducted a sickout strike in the Lexington-Richland 5 school district, forcing the closure of three high schools. The action was prompted by the refusal of the school board to vote on a plan presented by Superintendent Christina Melton that would reduce the number of in-person learning days. Roughly 70 students in the district protested the board’s failure to act in a demonstration outside another board meeting last Wednesday.

Hannah Forrester, a Chapin High School freshman participating in the protest, told the *Charleston Post and Courier*, “It’s hard to learn when you’re scared about a virus you can’t do anything about.”

In the face of the outpouring of opposition and anger on the part of teachers and students, the board voted to adopt Melton’s plan.

The plan reduces in-person instruction time from four days a week to two days a week for 7th to 12th graders, which began Monday and is slated to last until January 4. After that, four-day-a-week instruction is set to resume. Schools are then supposed to reopen five days a week on February 1. The school board will meet again on December 14 to decide whether to go through with these plans.

While the decision illustrates the potential for teachers and students to force the hand of local school boards, the limited measures outlined in Melton’s plan will do nothing to curb the spread of COVID-19 in schools and in the population as a whole. Under conditions of the rapid spread of the virus in the population, the continuation of any in-person

instruction will fan the flames of the pandemic and lead to unnecessary suffering and deaths of school workers and children.

The same disaster is unfolding all over the country, with the virus ripping through the population. However, in district after district and state after state, schools continue to reopen to house children so that their parents can be compelled to return to work. Both political parties are united in the goal of safeguarding the continuing flow of profits to the ruling class, whatever the cost in life and suffering to the population.

The South Carolina teachers' Facebook group "SC for Ed," which has organized multiple sick-outs and protests since 2019, conducted a survey of more than 2,500 teachers that showed 70 percent would be willing to participate in another unified sickout. Another survey by the same group found that 22 percent of over 2,000 respondents reported that they planned to leave the education profession entirely, noting low pay, exhaustion, being left out of decisions that endanger them, and fear of the pandemic.

Lisa Ellis, founder of the group, commented to *The State* on the sickouts: "Seeing what Lexington-Richland 5 did sort of encouraged teachers who feel unsafe, but who may feel alone in their unsafeness to start talking among themselves and organizing."

Teachers and education workers across the US and internationally understand the dangerous situation they have been forced into and have been actively opposing school re-openings since they began in late July. The primary obstacle preventing this massive and resolute opposition from becoming a unified fight against the bipartisan campaign to reopen schools has been the corporatist teachers' unions, which have done everything in their power *not* to connect teachers' struggles across district, state and national borders.

The sickouts in South Carolina occurred independently of the South Carolina Education Association (SCEA), which refuses to fight for teachers' lives. On its website, the union published a statement that openly admits as much, writing that "the SCEA has not played any role in organizing, facilitating, or encouraging today's activities."

The sense of isolation and fear felt by teachers is purposely maintained by these corrupt entities and by the two capitalist parties that demand schools reopen, in

order to prevent teachers and the broader working class from realizing and acting upon their decisive power. In March, this collective power was demonstrated by autoworkers who walked out of the plants, prompting the nationwide shut down of the auto industry.

The struggle confronting teachers is ultimately a class question. The ruling class is imposing homicidal, anti-scientific and profit-motivated demands upon the global working class, which is fighting to prioritize health and safety, science, and social need.

To fight for their interests, educators and all workers must build new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file safety committees entirely independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions. To carry forward their struggle, we urge South Carolina educators, parents, students and other workers to contact us immediately to build a committee in your district and workplace. The Socialist Equality Party will do everything in our power to help form and build this organization, in unity with educators across the US and internationally.



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