

“They never respected us enough to acknowledge the human lives lost.”

Montgomery, Alabama teachers demand the right to teach from home, are snubbed by school board

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On Tuesday, teachers from Montgomery, Alabama protested at their public school board meeting, demanding the right of educators to work from home and COVID-19 transparency from the district. Teachers who needed to quarantine sat in their cars outside the meeting, with dozens mounting placards on their vehicles that read, “Safer at home means safer at home.” The slogan referenced Republican Governor Kay Ivey’s original order of that name last September, a hypocritical measure which forced workers onto the job and failed to protect teachers.

Emotions ran high in the meeting held just three days after the burials of two beloved educators. Educators were livid that school board members neither attended these funerals, nor did they express their condolences or even name the victims at the meeting. “They never respected us enough to acknowledge the human lives lost,” a teacher angrily reported to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The day following the death of assistant principal Dr. Ennis McCorvey, Montgomery Public Schools announced that school would transition to virtual learning as of December 7. Nevertheless, the board continues to require that teachers work in-person from unsafe buildings.

Speaking at the meeting, educator Ebony Wilkes emphasized that teachers with underlying health conditions or whose age puts them at risk of severe complications from COVID-19 should be allowed to teach virtually from home. “I have a coworker with

three underlying conditions: type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and asthma,” reported Ms. Wilkes. “She is scared but has to come to work to support her family. We are all professionals. Most of us have more than one degree and we should be trusted enough to know we’ll do the right thing at home while teaching virtually.”

The teacher was abruptly interrupted by Board President Clare Weil, an owner of a fleet of UPS stores, asking, “How does this apply to operations of the day?” Weil callously dismissed the deadly conditions present across Montgomery schools and claimed Ms. Wilkes was off topic because the issue at hand was the progress of construction in the schools.

The educator replied, “I can talk about that because our school needs construction. It’s full of mold. May I continue please?” Far from being retrofitted with COVID-safe ventilation systems, Montgomery school buildings are all original construction. Many buildings are filled with mold, have filthy air vents and lack air conditioning and heating.

Addressing the board, teacher Dr. Delano Muhammad doubled down on the point, stating, “Our buildings are in shameful conditions. The classrooms are freezing. No heat in the classroom... In the summertime, it’s too hot. In winter, it’s too cold. In the teacher’s bathroom, window panes are missing, it’s freezing in there. Again it’s unacceptable... Our buildings are deteriorating.”

Ms. Wilkes reported that teachers are living in a state

of fear and anxiety. “I know many teachers who need to see a therapist, who experience anxiety and are stressed out, because teachers are getting the virus.”

Attempting to inquire about the CARES Act funding provided to the district, teacher Nicole Tolbert asked for an itemized list of expenditures and suggested that unused funds be spent on hiring additional personnel. But she, too, was arrogantly interrupted by the board president who repeated that the comment did not have to do with construction. Ms. Tolbert pleaded, “Please put it on the agenda. I’ll come back and speak about it.” Weil retorted, “Follow the rules and get on the agenda.”

In fact, teachers have called the school board offices multiple times to secure a spot on the agenda, but their calls were never answered or returned.

One educator commented, “I think the Superintendent and school board members should come into the school system and help sub, since we don’t have any subs. We should see them more, not just do walk-throughs, but come into the classroom and help... I guarantee [Ivey] won’t go into the schools, [she’s] in her governor mansion staying safe.”

While the school administration claims teachers are now safer since children are learning from home, additional educators are testing positive while they work in buildings without adequate ventilation and among coworkers.

While refusing to account for their CARES Act funding, the Montgomery school board voted to grant some “blood money”—an insulting \$500 bonus to teachers. Board President Clare Weil intoned that the bonus was in recognition of the “extraordinary circumstances” under which educators have worked. The sop and perfunctory statement was reportedly accompanied by a request that teachers “volunteer” an extra 10 hours a week on a special project.

While teachers have bravely stood up and exposed the conditions in their schools, the fact is that the administrations, school board, and state government answer not to the teachers or the broader working class, but to powerful business interests. The complete indifference of these entities to the concerns, even lives, of teachers was palpably evident.

“How they responded to us shows how much they care about what we think. How rude they were, they didn’t even make a response,” a teacher commented to

the WSWs.

No hope can be placed in administrators, officials or politicians to fight for the interests of educators. This is demonstrated in district after district, across every state, and in countries around the world. School boards were once democratic local councils, but that was long ago. Today the main function of school boards has been to keep school open, despite the lives lost, so that workers report to the job. For years, they have brutally implemented sweeping budget cuts across the US.

Full partners in the attacks on public education, these board members are personally dependent on campaign donations and are tightly connected with local or even national business groups such as the Alabama Business Council, as well as charter school chains and others seeking to siphon public education funding into edubusiness. Diane Ravitch recently noted that “Independent Expenditure” groups spent \$13 million in 2020 backing just two school board candidates in Los Angeles, because the composition of the school board would affect such wildly lucrative contracts.

Teachers should be disabused of the hope that their rights will be upheld by the big business parties or their local school boards. Instead, the Educators Rank and File Safety Committee, and the Socialist Equality Party, call upon teachers to turn out to the working class, the only social force which has the same interests—the defense of life, of public education, and the rights of educators and students.

Join our ranks today and connect your struggles with those of autoworkers, Amazon workers, healthcare workers, transportation workers and other sectors, to demand a complete shutdown of all schools and non-essential businesses until the pandemic is contained, with full compensation and benefits provided to all workers affected.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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