

Beloved El Paso, Texas teacher dies from COVID-19 as Governor presses schools to reopen

Tony Jackson
6 January 2021

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding a national online meeting at 12pm CST (1pm EST) this Saturday, January 9, titled, “Stop in-person learning until the pandemic is contained!” We urge all educators, parents, students and workers who wish to join the struggle to close schools and nonessential businesses to register today and invite your coworkers and friends.

The death of 35-year-old El Paso, Texas, teacher Zelene Blancas last week underscores the homicidal character of the ruling class policy of reopening schools and non-essential businesses amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

While her school and district were teaching remotely at the time Blancas tested positive on October 20, Texas Republican Governor Greg Abbott had pressured districts across the state to reopen, contributing to a major upsurge of the pandemic throughout the entire region. With Abbott renewing these efforts over the past month by seeking to tie school funding to districts’ reopening status, the district where Blancas taught, Socorro Independent School District, is now considering reopening in February.

Blancas was hospitalized shortly after testing positive for COVID-19. She appeared to be gradually recovering over a few weeks, but then her oxygen levels suddenly dropped and she was intubated on November 22. In total, she spent two months in the hospital before dying of complications from COVID-19.

Blancas had taught for over a decade, and most recently worked as a bilingual first-grade teacher at Dr. Sue A. Shook Elementary School. In 2018, millions of people watched and shared a video she posted on social

media of her students greeting one another with their own chosen interactions. From the statements of her loved ones and coworkers, it is clear that the impact she had on both the students she taught and the community she loved reflected a deep commitment to education and a desire to reach every student regardless of his or her background or economic situation.

Her humane efforts were not limited to the classroom. Following the mass shooting perpetrated by far-right domestic terrorist Patrick Crusius on August 3, 2019 that killed 23 and wounded another 23 at a local Walmart in El Paso, Blancas organized a fundraising effort to raise awareness about bullying at her school. By any objective measure, Zelena Blancas was a pillar of kindness and humanity who improved anything she worked on and anyone she worked with. Her death is an enormous tragedy and traumatic event for her family, all those that knew her well and those for whom she was a beloved teacher.

Blancas’ death is the latest in a growing number of students, educators, and loved ones who have died as a result of Abbott’s policies of reopening schools and nonessential businesses. Her death follows the passing of Paul Blackwell and Rose Mary Blackwell, married teachers from Grand Prairie, Texas, who died from COVID-19 on the same day on December 13, 2020.

On October 30, “perfectly healthy” kindergartner Tagan Drone died from the virus in Amarillo, Texas, putting to rest any notion that children are somehow immune from the worst ravages of the virus. On December 9, a 17-year-old in Tarrant County with preexisting conditions passed from the virus as well.

Each of these deaths weighs heavily on the hearts and consciences of every member of the community. They

are a small section of the likely hundreds or thousands of educators and students across the US and internationally that have died as a result of the reopening of schools.

At the time that Blancas was infected, El Paso was a major hotspot for the virus in the US, having experienced a 200 percent increase in hospitalizations over the month prior to her infection. The city's convention center was converted into a field hospital and mobile morgues were set up and staffed by prisoners who were paid merely \$2 per hour.

As of January 5, 29,028 people have died from COVID-19 in Texas and 1,868,949 have been infected, each the second-highest figures in the US. The pandemic is once again spiraling out of control, with Texas reporting 31,646 new cases and 277 deaths statewide, trailing only California. The seven-day test positivity rate now exceeds 20 percent statewide, and fewer than 700 ICU beds remain unoccupied. According to the COVID Monitor, there have already been 65,909 COVID-19 cases tied to school reopenings in Texas.

In response to this catastrophe, Abbott is placing ever-greater pressure on schools to reopen. He is once again threatening to cut funding for districts that remain virtual by removing "hold harmless" protections that shielded district's funds from drops in enrollment, something he had attempted to do at the start of the fall semester.

Across Texas, enrollment is down by roughly three percent, or nearly 156,800 students. El Paso's three largest districts—El Paso, Socorro and Ysleta—have seen enrollment drop by a combined 7,000 students, or five percent. As a result, the Socorro Independent School District faces a \$5.4 million state funding decrease under Abbott's plan.

Effective vaccines have been developed and are in the process of distribution. Local authorities and state administrations have the power to set metrics for school reopenings based on near-universal vaccination rates amongst the educators and paraprofessionals who will be in direct contact with students at the highest frequency. But the Republicans and Democrats, representing the financial oligarchy, have decided that any number of casualties is acceptable in defense of unmitigated profit.

The drive to reopen schools and the continued neglect

of basic safety measures for teachers and students alike shows that the working class will be needlessly sacrificed to ensure that stock valuations and quarterly statements continue to rise.

The only organization in Texas fighting to oppose these homicidal policies is the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed in early September as part of a network of rank-and-file committees across the country. Our aim is to unite educators with all other sections of the working class, to carry out a coordinated struggle to close all schools and nonessential businesses, in order to stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives.

Teachers and industrial workers should join and help build our committee, which is run exclusively by workers and advocates explicitly on those same workers' behalf. Sign up today and make plans to attend our next national call-in meeting at 12pm CST this Saturday at wsws.org/edsafety!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact