

Alabama educators launch rank-and-file safety committee to close schools and save lives!

Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
20 January 2021

The following is a statement from the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which has been established to oppose the unsafe opening of schools and nonessential workplaces, save lives and defend public education. Sign up today to join our committee at wsws.org/edsafety/!

We are forming the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to protect our lives and the lives of our students, families and the entire community. Our health care system is in a state of crisis. Earlier this month, the state recorded a record 5,498 new cases. Last week, COVID-19 hospitalizations topped 3,000 for the first time since the start of the pandemic, a 63 percent increase since December 4.

The number of new cases in December nearly doubled that of November, from 57,000 to 109,000. Ninety-one percent of ICU beds are full in the state and many hospitals are above 100 percent capacity. For the week ending January 15, Alabama's COVID-19 Schools K-12 Dashboard recorded 3,070 new cases. At least eight education workers in the state have needlessly died from the virus since schools reopened. Nationwide, the COVID Monitor has recorded 505,068 in K-12 schools.

These devastating numbers undoubtedly undercount the true number of COVID-19 cases and deaths caused by reopening schools.

Under Republican Governor Kay Ivey's fraudulent "Safer at Home" orders, teachers along with just about all other workers are mandated to work. As educators went home for the holiday, Montgomery Public Schools issued a menacing memo advising them that should they become ill, they should not expect any consideration in the form of extended paid leave. For his part, Alabama State Superintendent of Education Eric Mackey is being rewarded with a pay boost for his role in keeping the state's schools open during the pandemic.

Despite December being the worst month yet in the pandemic, and health officials warning that January will likely be worse, school districts across the state are rushing to reopen. Montgomery and Huntsville schools both reopened on January 5. Jefferson and Mobile counties returned students in person on January 11.

Throughout the pandemic, Ivey and the entire political and business establishment have adamantly refused to put public health first. On December 1, Ivey urged schools to reopen for full in-person instruction as quickly as possible, saying the science shows

schools to be safe. This is a blatant lie. Her real motives were clear when she tweeted her support to the Business Council of Alabama, writing, "I will not shut down businesses; the business community certainly has my support. As I've said many times, you cannot have a life without a livelihood." Meanwhile, after long denying the deadly threat, Ivey was first in line to receive the Pfizer vaccine.

As is true across the country, the refusal to enact a temporary shutdown of schools and all nonessential production serves the interests of the corporate and financial elite. The "Keep Alabama Open" campaign was initiated by the Business Council of Alabama, consisting of the state's most powerful banks, energy, insurance, military, automotive and investment corporations.

In December, it was announced that the Alabama Innovation Commission would partner with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, an ultraconservative think tank, which played a large role in promoting the pseudo-scientific arguments to support "herd immunity," or letting the virus spread uncontrolled.

The presumptive incoming leader of the Alabama Senate, Republican Greg Reed, said he plans to prioritize business legislation, including continuing tax incentives programs for corporations. His other priority is to pass legislation that would protect governments and businesses from "frivolous lawsuits that would come as a result of the coronavirus."

In order to carry out their plans, the ruling class and governments are actively suppressing data on the spread of the virus. They refuse to notify workers of outbreaks in schools and workplaces, while those who bravely stand up to inform the public are targeted and persecuted.

Data scientist Rebekah Jones, who founded the most comprehensive database of COVID-19 cases in K-12 schools nationally, was fired from her job with the Florida Department of Health for refusing to doctor the numbers. Then the police raided her home to seize her data, pointing guns at her and her young children. She was arrested Sunday, has since posted bail and has contracted the virus herself. We give our full support to Jones and other whistleblowers and demand the right to all information on the virus' spread.

Under these conditions, the Alabama Education Association and local unions have stood by and done nothing to protect our lives. They have, moreover, actively dissuaded teachers from protesting

this state of affairs, tolerated the outrageous demand that teachers must report to buildings even when schools are closed, and refused to support our right to accommodations or to insist on the COVID-retrofitting of unsanitary schools.

The rollout of the coronavirus vaccines, and the fact that more transmissible SARS-CoV-2 variants are spreading across the US, make it all the more imperative that immediate action be taken to halt the spread of the virus until it is safe. Currently, Alabama has the lowest vaccination rate in the country. As of January 19, only two percent of the state's population had received the vaccine.

Alabama was the birthplace of the modern civil rights movement. That same commitment to the equal rights of all citizens to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness takes on new meaning as we confront a pandemic which is criminally being allowed to rage uncontrolled.

Why do the powers-that-be refuse to fund a lockdown and provide the population with income security? Why are hospitals and frontline workers underfunded and overworked? Why are nonessential workers, including teachers, forced to work to feed the insatiable demands of Wall Street?

We do not accept the current state of affairs. Therefore, we are taking matters into our hands. The Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is completely independent of the unions, the Republicans and the Democrats, and is answerable ONLY to education workers, parents and students.

We support the struggles of the metalworkers in Muscle Shoals who recently went on strike for nearly a month against unfair labor practices and proposed health care cuts. We urge metal workers, autoworkers, poultry and paper workers, Walmart workers, city workers, as well as teachers across the state and nationally to join with us and form your own committees. We speak for what the working class needs, not what big business tells us is "affordable."

We know there are resources to protect the lives AND livelihoods of workers and small businesses. In the CARES Act, Wall Street bailed itself out, funneling \$3 trillion into the coffers of big business overnight. Instead of help, we are told we must return to work to help the "economy." Whose economy? The wealth of the US billionaires has soared during the pandemic because the government prioritizes share values over human life.

The money lavished on the corporate and financial elite must be redirected to support teachers, parents and children, provide mental health services and necessary food supplies, and to retrofit schools for safety. In Alabama alone, the combined wealth of the ten richest individuals is \$11.5 billion. Across the US, the top 15 billionaires have increased their profits by over \$1 trillion *during* the pandemic. There is more than ample money to meet these essential demands:

1. For the suspension of all in-person instruction for public, private, charter schools and colleges! Educators must have the right to work from home and protect the lives of themselves, their families and their communities.

2. Full transparency from the local and state school boards regarding the spread of the virus! Whistleblowers and those suffering from long-haul COVID must be given employment security with no loss of income. There can be no shortcuts on quarantining. No one should be pressured to return to work if they

are sick or contagious because they have run out of leave time.

3. All decisions on reopening schools must be determined democratically by rank-and-file committees of educators, school workers, parents and students in each school in collaboration with trusted scientists and health experts!

4. All teachers and school workers must be given the opportunity to be fully vaccinated before returning to the school buildings!

5. Teachers and students must be guaranteed state-of-the-art technology, including high-quality computer hardware and software and accessories, and free high-speed Internet access! An estimated 22 percent of Alabama households had no Internet access in 2018. As many as 17 percent did not have a computer at all. This must be fixed immediately.

6. Unite all educators, parents and workers! We demand full income protection during the pandemic both for workers who would compromise their health on the job and for parents who need to assist their children's education at home. The CARES Act money must be redirected to ensure the health and safety of all workers and the education of the younger generation! Federal and state moratoriums on evictions and foreclosures must be reinstated.

7. Halt all nonessential production! Until the pandemic is contained, only key industries such as food production, medical care and logistics should remain open. Workers in those industries must be provided with the most advanced safety measures to prevent infection. All workers have access to high-quality, free health care during the pandemic.

8. Sanitary conditions must be guaranteed in all schools! State funding must be provided for an immediate retrofitting of all school buildings and classrooms to ensure that they have modern, high-quality plumbing and ventilation systems, air conditioning, and air purifiers. Students and teachers have the right to work and learn without exposing themselves to deadly toxins, be they viruses, mold, mildew, asbestos or lead.

9. Free, high-quality mental health and social services for all students and families who request help! All homeless and home-insecure students and families must be provided with free, safe and dignified housing.

10. Under no conditions is it justifiable to require educators to teach face-to-face and virtual students at the same time!

We call on all educators and support staff, including bus drivers, teachers' aides, secretaries, paraprofessionals, janitors, cooks, nurses, school psychologists, social workers and workers from all industries, to join and help build the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in your school or workplace. Fill out the "Join" form at wsws.org/edsafety.



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wsws.org/contact