Montgomery, Alabama schools announce a switch to full-virtual learning following teacher sickout

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On Monday, January 25, dozens of Montgomery Public Schools (MPS) educators conducted a sickout across the district. The district—adamant for months that educators must work from unsafe buildings—abruptly announced within hours that the district will be fully virtual as of February 1.

Many teachers were justifiably relieved and pleased, "So did we accomplish this without AEA [Alabama Educators Association]? There is power in Unity," said one on Facebook, with another chiming in, "WE DID IT!!!!"

Since the fall, Montgomery educators had pointed to the science, exposed unsafe buildings and demanded full-virtual learning. They staged demonstrations on the Capitol steps and testified on unsafe and deadly conditions at school board meetings. On January 20, they launched an independent Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

The breaking point came, however, last week after four educators died in one week and the district continued its homicidal policy requiring teachers report to buildings rather than teach remotely from home. Students who opted for face-to-face had been brought back into buildings on January 11.

Over the weekend, the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety committee issued a statement expressing its "heartfelt sympathy to the families of the educators who have passed away this week in Montgomery and Birmingham" and condemning "the continued, needless loss of life that is the result of the policies of the local and state school boards, superintendents and politicians. Educators are being sacrificed in order to sustain the Alabama economy in the service of the powerful Business Council of Alabama."

The statement continued, "We demand that schools be closed immediately to protect the lives of educators, school workers, students and their families!"

In flagrant violation of health standards, the district also maintained contact sports and physical education, which likely contributed to the tragic loss of three coaches in Montgomery alone. These deaths included: MPS administrator and football coach Dwayne Berry, Capitol Heights Middle School physical education teacher Lushers Lane, and Park Crossing High School coach DeCarlos Perkins. Also passing last week was Booker T. Washington Magnet High School piano teacher Leslye Ames.

Schools Superintendent Ann Roy Moore made the announcement about switching to remote-only at 1 PM, after many schools reported mass absences of teachers. According to one educator, Dannelly Elementary had only four teachers report in person. A Dannelly staff member is reportedly currently in intensive care with COVID-19, fighting for their life.

For months, the school board callously dismissed the teachers' safety concerns as the disaster mounted. Last week's deaths from coronavirus followed the loss of at least that many previously, including Morris Pitts, a custodian at Jefferson Davis High School, and Dr. Ennis McCorvey III, assistant principal at Lee High School.

The belated—and clearly reluctant—anouncement by MPS amounts to a tactical retreat. While there is widespread relief among teachers that they will be able to work safely from home, their sentiments are also coupled with indignation. "About five months late and how many lives?" one commenter said on social media. "At the cost of our friends and colleagues," said another.

Speaking to the WSWS, another teacher said, "It's a cover up. They were strong-armed into it. I'm glad we finally get to teach from home, but [Superintendent Moore] said only four died of COVID-19, that's not true." She said the switch to virtual should take place immediately, not a week from now, as this is an emergency situation. "They say it's to give parents a chance to get it together, but if we had inclement weather it would be immediate." Another said, "We are still cautious. We think the superintendent has something up her sleeve."

As has been the case at previous board meetings, neither the superintendent nor board president acknowledged the deceased employees by name, but callously issued

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amorphous “condolences” to their families and coworkers.

Teachers are particularly angered by the role of the Alabama Education Association, which has done nothing to help them as the death toll mounted. Instead, it sought to cover its own complicity by issuing a statement last week calling for a “reevaluation” of safety guidelines. After the four deaths, AEA Associate Executive Director Theron Stokes penned a mealy-mouthed letter urging more “focus” be given to the system and allowing remote learning.

Bending over backwards to demonstrate its goal of continued collaboration with school board, Stokes stated, "It is not our intention to point the finger or allege blame, but it is time we identify and push for things that will make a difference.”

The AEA offical went on to provide what amounts to a blanket amnesty to MPS, stating that “the number of COVID-19 cases within the system are on track with what systems across the state are reporting,” according to MSN news.

“AEA is acting like it finally stepped it in, but it took eight [deaths] to do so,” noted the educator angrily. It took the independent actions of educators to insist on fully-virtual education in the city. The sickout specifically called for: transparent reporting of COVID-19 cases, efficient contact tracing and an immediate closure and transition to virtual learning. A petition started on Change.org calling for the immediate closure of MPS schools also received over 2,500 signatures.

Clearly educators have proven their strength. However, the superintendent and school board will continue to conspire to reopen the schools as quickly as possible, whether it is safe or not. This is the determined policy not just of Governor Kay Ivey, the Business Council of Alabama and the AEA, but of the Biden administration, which is determined to send children back so their parents can resume producing corporate profit.

For her part, Moore indicated that a return to in-person learning would begin when vaccines are made available to school employees, expected to be sometime between February and March. Given the catastrophic rollout of vaccines, this in nothing more than an effort by the district and the unions to package the reopening of schools.

The newly-formed Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is maintaining its political independence from the politicians who staff the school board and state education department, as well as the AEA. It will continue to work to unify parents, autoworkers, healthcare workers and others together with educators to fight for the shutdown of *all* nonessential workplaces and demand full compensation for workers and small businesses. Like the teachers in the schools, all sections of Alabama workers should demand a lockdown of the economy until the pandemic is brought under control.

In its statement issued over the weekend, the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee said “the Alabama Education Association refuses to support teachers or mobilize them to force an immediate halting of in-person learning. Trying to save its own image, the AEA issued a call to the powers-that-be to implement half-measures, including delaying in-person instruction through February and limiting sporting events to ‘officials, athletes, coaches and immediate family members.’”

It continued: “The pandemic is out of control in Alabama. 2,155 new cases were reported in K-12 schools this week, with 11 districts recording their highest case count yet. WalletHub reported a national study on safety metrics on January 21, which found that Alabama is the worst in the nation in terms of current death rate per population, hospitalization rate and vaccination rate. Overall, it was rated 50th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia.

“To contain the virus requires an immediate halting of ALL nonessential services including in-person schooling, sporting events, and nonessential businesses, together with a fully funded investment into universal testing, contact tracing and a vast expansion of the healthcare system's capacity. The money given to Wall Street and the major corporations via the CARES Act must be redirected to fund these emergency measures, including full income and healthcare for all workers. Parents should not be penalized, they should be supported with full income and all necessary social services, so that we can stay home and save lives.

“We call on educators, parents, students and all workers across Alabama to help us build our movement and unite with us in our struggle against the criminal policies that have left 443,000 Alabamans infected and 6,660 dead. Contact us today to help build and expand our committee! Sign up at the Alabama Educators Rank and File Safety Committee here!”

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