Montgomery, Alabama school district reneges on pledge to switch to remote learning

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Within 24 hours of the announcement by Montgomery Public Schools (MPS) that schools would go all-virtual, the district—long under the thumb of business interests—began backpedaling.

On Monday, dozens of Montgomery Public Schools educators in Alabama staged a sickout in response to the horrific news that four of their colleagues passed away from COVID-19 the previous week, all within 48 hours.

The most recent deaths of educators across the state include MPS administrator and football coach Dwayne Berry on January 19, Capitol Heights Middle School physical education teacher Lushers Lane on January 20, and Park Crossing High School coach DeCarlos Perkins on January 20. On January 21, Booker T. Washington Magnet High School piano teacher Leslye Ames passed. In Birmingham, Derrick Johnson, 43, a coach and special education teacher, passed away January 10.

In response to Monday's sickout, the school district quickly called a press conference. Superintendent Ann Roy Moore then announced that teachers would be allowed to teach remotely until a vaccine was more widely available. "Starting February 1, 2021, all MPS students will resume a virtual learning schedule," she told reporters. "MPS employees, during that time, will work remotely." Indicating that she was talking out of both sides of her mouth, however, Moore added that MPS' 4,500 employees would "receive information about their work schedules from their direct supervisors."

It turned out on Tuesday that the "work schedules" involved teachers reporting to their classrooms one day a week, a measure which also required paraprofessionals to report alongside their assigned teachers. Additionally, all teachers are required to come to school for half a day on Wednesdays for faculty meetings.

According to guidelines, any teacher who fails to report to their classroom on their scheduled day must record that day as an absence, along with a note stating, "no sub needed." They must still provide "reinforcement activities" for the children to do from home.

MPS teacher Corinne—whose name has been changed to protect her identity—says she and her colleagues were "pissed," but not surprised.

"We knew it couldn't be that easy. We knew there was going to be some sleight of hand. It's a lie," she told the *World Socialist Web Site*. Speaking of Superintendent Moore, she says, "You lied to the public to make it seem like you're doing what's best."

The Alabama Education Association (AEA) has been silent about the district's backpedaling. "Teachers are asking, 'Where's AEA? Where are they at?' People are saying they've called and get no answer," Corinne relates.

Throughout the pandemic, the AEA has steadfastly refused to take action as an estimated eight educators in Montgomery alone have died from COVID-19. Last week, after the stunning news of four more deaths, the union responded with a meekly-worded letter asking the district to consider allowing teachers to work remotely.

Nevertheless, the union quickly pounced upon Ann Roy Moore's announcement Monday as its own victory, as if it had not trailed behind outraged MPS teachers like a dog with its tail tucked between its legs. "They get under the wind we create and say, 'See? I made a tornado!'" Corinne quips. "That was already in the works, you just want to put your name on it."

The MPS teachers' struggle for remote instruction coincides with the discovery of the more easily transmissible B.1.1.7 variant of COVID-19 in Alabama, which has led to a deadly wave of infection throughout the United Kingdom. Two of Alabama's three known cases of the UK variant are in the Montgomery area.

"With these variants, we don't need to be anywhere but in our homes," Corinne commented.

An angry teacher posted on Facebook, "Ann Roy

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Moore said teachers will be working remotely. Jade Jones' Recap Email said 'MPS school personnel will work remotely.' I am sorry but there was no caveat that stated that meant 4 out of five days. So, [she] stands there in front of the media and says one thing and is already changing that two days later.

"You can catch COVID with just one sneeze in your general direction. Staff have already spread and will continue to spread COVID to other staff members. If the Board is truly concerned about my safety, teaching remotely is JUST that. It does NOT mean—remote teaching 4 days a week and teaching from the school building 1 day a week.

"So, I am a self-contained elementary teacher. I hauled everything I could possibly need to teach all subjects from home. Now, they want me to haul it back and forth every week? What's next? MPS directs employees back in the building two days a week, then three, then four, and finally to us being back in the building five days a week. Are they going to make that new directive public?"

For their part, the school board, led by UPS Stores businesswoman Clare Weil, called a "special meeting" on Tuesday evening. The pressing concern was not the unprecedented death toll among educators in the district but deciding on an application for a new charter school, I Dream Big Academy.

The growth of charter schools in the state, as nationally, represents a broadside against public education. These privately-run schools are businesses which drain urgently needed funding from their public counterparts. The union is also complicit in this attack. In 2019, AEA Associate Executive Director Theron Stokes put out the welcome mat for the charter industry, saying, "As time goes by, it is our hope that charter schools will not be a new fad, but an opportunity to provide students the education they need."

That same year, the Montgomery school board began the process of converting existing schools—Davis Elementary, Nixon Elementary, and Bellingrath Middle School—into charters. Davis Elementary is set to reopen as a charter in 2021, with start-up charter LIFE Academy also to open its doors then.

The callous disregard towards mounting educator deaths by the MPS school board is not surprising. It is replicated across the state and country by school boards and state legislatures, staffed by Democratic and Republican politicians tied by a million threads to businesses determined to reopen schools so that workers can be on the job. After two Cobb County, Georgia, teachers died of COVID-19 earlier this month, the school board members went out of the way to disrespect them by refusing to don masks.

In Broward County, Florida, teachers who have asked for remote instruction have been spied upon by the school board. It has combed through teachers' social media accounts, searching for evidence of them violating social distancing recommendations. The board crowed over a Facebook photo of James Keith Calloway, a 58-year-old coach and teacher posing with his extended family unmasked. Calloway then explained to reporters that the photo had been taken in December of 2019, before any cases of COVID-19 had been reported in the US.

Corinne is not surprised by these actions. "That's just more reason to not be in school with exposure to people who don't take it seriously," she says. "They're going to have to fire me, because I'm not going to work," she says of MPS' new rules. "I'm not going to use my sick leave, because I'm still teaching my virtual students."

She dismisses politicians' hypocritical invocation of the needs of children when they demand school reopenings.

"The social aspects that are missing are not the fault of the school," she says. "Where were you asking about the kids all the years we were going down the drain? Where were you when Alabama became 51st in the nation in education rankings?"

"We are breathing in the pollution of neglect," she continues. "All COVID did was expose the extreme lack that was already there."

The Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is mobilizing educators, parents, students and other workers independently of the unions, school boards, Democrats and Republicans. They are fighting for the shutdown of all nonessential workplaces and a real lock-down to stop the spread of the virus. The decision to return to schools must be taken by rank-and-file educators, in consultation with trusted medical professionals, not left in the hands of the politicians. To get involved, sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety!

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