

“They aren’t putting these cases in the news in a big way anymore”

Alabama loses another beloved educator to COVID-19

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The Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is hosting a special meeting at 2 p.m. CST on Saturday, April 24, demanding a shutdown of all nonessential production and fully remote education. Join us for “Unite Alabama educators, Amazon workers and coal miners to shut down nonessential workplaces and save lives!” Register today and share this event widely with coworkers and on social media!

“It’s been hard. We were family. Her main thing was joy,” said Tammy Glidewell, describing Shelia Smith, the most recent victim of COVID-19 among Alabama educators. Both Smith and her friend Glidewell worked with children in special education.

Smith was by all accounts a particularly vivacious and caring soul. A longtime special education (SPED) aide at Straughn Elementary School (SES) in Covington County near Andalusia, she passed away March 26 in Mobile. The school where she had taught for more than 20 years posted a memorial on its marquee, “Shelia Smith. Like you, may we always live, laugh and love.”

“She loved everybody,” Glidewell recounted to the Andalusia Star News. “She was a friend to anyone that she met. That was just her. She was going to love on you and she was going to be your friend.” Characteristically, she met everyone with a morning hug.

Lisa Thomas, another colleague and first-grade teacher, called Smith “one of a kind” and “the life of the party.” She added, “She was probably one of the most joyful people that I have ever known.”

As an SPED aide, Smith worked for hours one-on-one with her students, forming a strong bond with each of them. “They were hers,” Thomas described. “From Kindergarten to fifth grade, they were with her. She would always make sure that they had absolutely everything they needed—whether it was shoes or notebooks. She would contact churches to get what they needed.”

When Smith was stricken by COVID-19 in February, the district was providing face-to-face instruction. She fought the disease for more than a month. “You know, in our minds that wasn’t supposed to happen,” said SES Assistant Principal

Daniel Rodgers, emphasizing, “She was a fighter.” The veteran educator was 61 years old and expected to retire soon.

Smith’s was not the first death among the SES community. On December 13, 2020, Doris Glaun Henderson, 84, of Andalusia, also succumbed to the virus. Henderson had served as a day care assistant at the same school as Smith.

As Smith was battling for her life in February, Covington County school superintendent Shannon Driver spelled out the cold calculus of the administration, “It has been difficult covering classes. We have had a pretty steady stream of teachers who have gotten the virus, so hopefully, this [the vaccine] will slow it down and we can have everybody work more consistently.”

Andalusia school superintendent Ted Watson similarly stated that “students have not had it at the rate that our teachers have had it,” as justification for in-person instruction. He went on to state that “herd immunity has been something that as a society we have been trying to obtain,” and “we are just trying to get as adapted to this COVID-19 virus.”

The local authorities speak not just for themselves, but also channel the priorities of Biden, Trump before him, and capitalist politicians worldwide. To speak plainly, it is not “society” which is demanding the homicidal policy of letting the virus rip known as “herd immunity,” but big business and their supporting politicians.

At the demands of the Alabama Business Council, comprised of bankers, automakers, Amazon, the poultry industry, and other corporate entities, the majority of schools have offered in-person instruction throughout the pandemic in order to compel parents to return to unsafe workplaces.

Meanwhile, it has been definitively established that the deliberate lack of testing of children coupled with face-to-face learning, school sports and accompanying social gatherings have driven the explosion of cases among parents and communities. This linkage has been shown wherever such statistics are gathered, including in Michigan, Illinois and internationally.

Alabama districts with short-term restrictions such as Birmingham City and Montgomery Public Schools (MPS) are

now reopening. Both of these Democratic Party-controlled cities brought students back for face-to-face instruction on April 5. While Alabama's Republican Governor Kay Ivey ended the state's mask mandate on Friday, April 9, the demand that the working class must "live with the virus" no matter the cost in lives is shared by both political parties.

None of the government policymakers have supported a lockdown to save lives or funding for retrofitting all schools amid the pandemic, much less a massive infusion into remote learning and social supports for families. The only difference between the big business politicians is that the Democrats have continued local mask mandates while opening schools. Masks are, of course, a welcome but entirely toothless provision.

A Montgomery educator told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "A lot of hiding is going on, with schools going back and forth between virtual and face-to-face. There's cases and quarantines but they're specifically not putting it in the news. Teachers are trying to fight back, but we just lost a teacher in Covington County last week. The media isn't putting it out there in a big way like they used to. They're trying to get everyone to think, 'Yay, schools are open,' but they're not addressing the issues.

"I just got an email from one of my students, saying he's sorry that he's not in class, but he has COVID. This is a real issue to me—he's a baby. It makes me sad. My kids are 12 and 13 and they shouldn't have to deal with this at all."

At present, Alabama has a new case rate of 42.1 per 100,000 residents, the second lowest rate in the nation. However, the test positivity rate is at 10 percent, indicating that many coronavirus cases are being missed.

Alabama has now suffered 10,712 confirmed or probable COVID-19-related deaths and 518,899 cases. There have also been 80 probable cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) in the state, according to Children's of Alabama. However, one only has to look to Michigan to see how quickly these statistics can escalate out of control as variants proliferate.

Governor Ivey's most recent revision of her misnamed "Safer at Home" order for K-12 schools waters down even the politically-compromised CDC guidelines. It calls for "reasonable steps where practicable" to have three feet of separation in schools. The guidelines likewise call for facial coverings "to the greatest extent practicable" when employees or students are in "regular interaction" within six feet.

The Montgomery educator added, "Not only are you exposing us, you are not giving us anything to protect ourselves with. They are taking the money out of the school budget, which they feel should be used to clean and fix our buildings up, to start selling our schools to be charters."

She denounced the arrogant and vindictive memo recently circulated by the MPS Human Resources department aimed at blackmailing educators back into the classroom. The memo, striking for its callous tone, informed teachers that should they test positive for COVID-19 as of April 5, they should

quarantine and expect their pay to be docked—unless they have vacation or accrued time. Moreover, as "teachers/staff have been given the opportunity the (sic) get vaccinated," MPS will not provide "free days" but, again, teachers should use paid time off or see their paycheck drop.

Further, education staff are informed that if they choose not to return in-person, they should "take a leave of absence, resign or retire." It should be emphasized that MPS has already tragically lost at least seven veteran educators to COVID-19, including four within 48 hours. Only after this terrible loss did the district relent to teachers' demands and temporarily halt in-person classes.

None of these tragedies have softened the overarching profit imperatives of the powers-that-be. Whether or not teachers are exposed to the virus, sick themselves or attempting to get an inoculation, the district is primarily concerned with making sure they don't expect to be compensated.

Some Montgomery teachers raised this insulting, if not homicidal, policy in a zoom meeting with Alabama Educators Association (AEA) officials. "But we've heard nothing," the Montgomery teacher noted. In fact, according to an AEA spokeswoman, the union has reviewed each school's reopening plans and has monitored their implementation—placing their seal of approval on the entire policy. At least 31 educators have perished from the virus across Alabama so far, for which the AEA is culpable.

Educators in Alabama have taken the first courageous steps to reverse these attacks by forming the independent Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as part of a network of rank-and-file committees of workers who will not, and cannot, subordinate their lives and rights to the profit demands of big business. Only the mobilization of the working class, united behind a program guided by science and human need, is capable of putting an end to the pandemic and securing the future of public education. We urge all educators, parents, students and other workers in Alabama to join and help build this committee today!



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