

COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations on the rise in Alabama after easing of restrictions

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On Saturday, April 24, at 2 p.m. CDT, the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is hosting a meeting calling for the unification of all workers in Alabama: “Support educators, Warrior Met miners, and Amazon workers! Unite our struggles to save lives AND livelihoods!” Register here and invite your coworkers, friends and family to this important meeting.

On April 7, Alabama’s Republican Governor Kay Ivey lifted the state’s mask mandate, citing a decline in cases and hospitalizations since peak numbers in January. During a press conference, both Ivey and State Health Officer Dr. Scott Harris spoke gushingly of the state of the pandemic in Alabama, saying “we’ve finally rounded the corner” and that the “pandemic is almost over.” Obligatory mention was made of the fact that the virus continues to spread, but they assured the public that “common sense” and “personal responsibility” were enough to keep the state’s numbers down.

To place the onus of the pandemic on the population obscures the reality that the widespread death and social catastrophe is the result of policies consciously implemented by governments around the world, which have prioritized corporate profits over human lives. Since March of 2020, after the US Congress passed the so-called CARES Act and gave trillions of dollars to Wall Street, the federal, state and local governments, aided by the corporate media, have insisted that the public must learn to live with the virus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), under the pressure of the Trump and now Biden administrations, has distorted science to claim that schools can safely reopen.

In reality, the measures needed to stop the spread of the virus and eradicate the pandemic are well known by governments, but willfully ignored. As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently noted, comprehensive “testing, contact tracing and quarantining... were employed in all nations that have managed to rein in the virus. As of March 22, 2021, Taiwan, a country of 24 million people, has had 1,006 reported infections and 10 deaths. In Singapore, home to five million people, new cases have remained in the single or low

double digits since October 2020.” Such measures are not widespread in the US and Alabama is no exception.

In a preemptive move, the Alabama legislature is working to make it more difficult for any statewide emergency orders to be put into place. The *Montgomery Advertiser* described “a bill from Sen. Tom Whatley, R-Auburn, that would require the Legislature to approve the extension of certain states of emergency. Earlier, the chamber approved a bill from Rep. Jamie Kiel, R-Russellville, that would allow businesses and churches to stay open during an emergency, provided they follow the governor’s orders during a pandemic... [Whatley’s bill] would also require the governor to make a ‘good-faith effort’ to get the approval of a Legislative Council before taking any action that would ‘restrict, limit, or otherwise burden the conduct of private citizens or businesses.’”

On April 20, AP News reported that hospitalizations in Alabama increased by 20 percent over the previous ten days and that the rolling seven-day average of new daily cases increased by 55 percent from April 8-21. Testing has also decreased since a high of 87,451 tests conducted the week of December 13, down to 22,563 during the current week. The test positivity rate is currently 15.90 percent and demonstrates a high level of community transmission.

Another alarming trend is the spread of variants throughout Alabama. The UK B.1.1.7 variant is now thought to make up 60 percent of cases in the state, according to Dr. Sixto Leal of the University of Alabama Birmingham (UAB) Pathology Department. Two cases of the South African B.1.351 variant have also been identified. Currently, the UAB is the primary lab conducting genetic sequencing of the virus and is sequencing fewer than one hundred tests per week.

In Montgomery, school outbreaks are also once again on the rise after in-person learning resumed on April 5. Eighteen cases were reported in the district during the week ending April 16. Statewide, 334 cases were reported last week, up nearly 77 percent from 257 the week prior.

One Montgomery educator told the WSWs, “The situation

in the Montgomery school district regarding the virus is terrible. Personally, I do not feel safe teaching in person. It is very difficult teaching small children who really don't understand what's going on. Things are awful and very stressful. The superintendent gets on the news to say how safe everything is and that's simply not true. What makes me really angry is that teachers have no say in the decisions being made and now the CDC keeps watering down the guidelines. Why is this being done? It is because they want children in school and the parents working. Why should I risk my life so someone else can get very wealthy?"

The teacher added, "In addition to the existing virus you now have the transmission of new variants, and under these conditions there are districts around us who are not requiring their students to wear a mask. Just the other day, I had a third grade student come to me to report that his grandfather had COVID. I have loved teaching up until now. No one is listening to what we say and it's for this reason we need to have Rank-and-File Safety Committees in every location and our voices need to be heard. They are killing teachers. What good is an economy if masses of people die? How can this be normal? You can not treat a deadly virus the way you deal with a common cold."

In January, a group of Alabama teachers took the initiative to form the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, part of a network of such committees across the US and internationally. These committees are completely independent of the big business Democratic and Republican parties, as well as the trade unions which have collaborated with the national, state and local governments in marching teachers and workers back to their jobs to produce profit for the wealthy elites.

Districts are following the lead of Governor Ivey's easing of restrictions. On social media, one educator disclosed that a district in the Montgomery suburbs is "no longer quarantining students who were exposed to positive cases. They are no longer asking students to remain socially distant if they are wearing masks, and some teachers are no longer enforcing masks."

At least thirteen educators in Alabama have died from COVID-19 since the start of 2021, according to local news and Edweek.org. The numbers of deaths and cases in schools is likely higher, as there is no systematic tracking of workplace spread by state or national officials. Another teacher told the WSWS, "They are keeping the numbers low. We had three deaths in my school alone."

Meanwhile, the Alabama legislature is deciding on a proposed education budget which would include a measly two percent pay raise for education workers. Depending on a teacher's degree level and teaching experience, this amounts to between \$800 - \$1,000 a year. This is a slap in the face

considering the conditions teachers have had to endure during the pandemic, including teaching double course loads to accommodate both in-person and virtual students, dangerous working conditions, and the physical and emotional damage of contracting the virus or losing a colleague. In 2020, teacher retirements in Alabama were at the highest level in a decade.

The working class continues to pay the cost of the capitalist policies. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities recently released data showing the ongoing economic misery faced by millions of Americans. In Alabama, as of March 2021, 11 percent of adults reported that their households did not have enough to eat, and 10 percent said that children in their households did not have enough to eat. Also, 199,000 Alabamans, or 22 percent, are not caught up on rent.

Workers across Alabama are determined to fight for their lives and livelihoods. For three weeks, over 1,000 coal miners at Warrior Met Coal in Brookwood have been on strike for better pay and working conditions, including the reversal of a \$6/hour wage cut pushed through with the help of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in 2016.

In Bessemer, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union suffered a staggering defeat to install itself at the Amazon facility, despite unprecedented support from AFL-CIO bureaucracy, the ruling class and the political establishment. This top-down operation failed to gather any confidence among workers themselves, with only 12 percent of the workforce voting in favor of the union.

Educators, coal miners, Amazon workers and other workers across Alabama need a path forward to fight for their interests. As the experiences with the Alabama Education Association, UMWA and RWDSU demonstrate, the unions are tools of the ruling class. Workers must take matters into their own hands, independent of the capitalist parties and the corporatist trade unions, which for decades have policed the class struggle rather than advance their interests.

We urge Alabama workers to establish rank-and-file committees in each workplace in order to unify workers' struggles across industries and fight to contain the pandemic and save lives. Attend this Saturday's meeting to discuss this perspective. Share the event on social media, and invite your coworkers, family and friends!



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