

# Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meeting calls for class unity, supports Warrior Met miners

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*For more information on educator committees and to join an expanding network of such committees internationally, go to [wsws.org/edsafety](https://wsws.org/edsafety).*

The Alabama Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee (AERFSC) held a meeting on Saturday, April 24, to demand safe working conditions and to express their solidarity with the ongoing strike of Warrior Met Coal miners near Birmingham. Lively reports and discussion summarized the lessons of the current battles that teachers, miners and Amazon workers face in Alabama and throughout the United States.

"We are here to support educators, Warrior Met miners and Amazon workers here in the state of Alabama against the capitalist system that is putting our lives in danger," said a founding member of the group in opening the meeting. "In my district, we have been fighting collectively. We have been arguing for our rights as teachers and as human beings to work in an environment that allows us to live and breathe.

"We had to fight numerous obstacles. We held numerous protests ... and were forced to either work or be denied pay. We fought. We used science, we used everything before us to argue that we all need to be at home while we're in this pandemic, and it took eight lives to pass before they finally made us go remotely virtual.

"We also had numerous teachers be sick, as well as students, family members and workers. All of this for what, for what? For what cause? The information that we're going to be providing here shows that it's not just educators that are going through this but all workers. We want to show that we stand together and unite with all working class people to show that we have rights.

"We should not be shamed. We should not be put aside and we should not be silenced for fighting for our right to survive.

"Today we have people from Amazon, other teachers and from the Socialist Equality Party to let you know the tools that you need so that you can go back to your areas and do the same thing. There is no such thing as being wrong to argue for your right to live as well as make a living."

Socialist Equality Party leader Julian L'Heureau spoke on the global developments of the COVID-19 pandemic. "This time

last year we saw 3 million cases globally, and over 200,000 people who lost their lives to the virus. Today, more than 3 million are dead and the average number of daily confirmed cases is at the highest rate during the entire pandemic, standing at more than 752,000."

L'Heureau called the pandemic a "devastating indictment of the ruling elites of every major country and the capitalist system as a whole" and denounced the "ruling class' incessant drive to reopen the economy and the schools" and its failure to guarantee universal vaccinations worldwide.

Emma Arcenaux, another SEP member, also spoke on the international conditions against which the fight of Alabama educators plays out. She highlighted the rampant spread of the virus throughout India and Brazil, remarking that the mass graves of the latter give the lie to Bolsonaro's position that the virus is "just a little flu."

She noted that Alabama Governor Kay Ivey's assertion that the pandemic is winding to a close is a lie "meant to disarm and blind workers to the grave danger posed by the accelerating pandemic. ... In fact, we are in the worst part of the pandemic to date."

A founding member of the Baltimore Amazon Workers [BW12] Rank-and-File Safety Committee addressed the recent repudiation of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU)'s organizing drive at the warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. He emphasized the need for independent rank-and-file committees answerable to the working class itself.

The Amazon worker pointed out that the union failed to put forward a single demand, "Why should anyone vote yes to a black box, pie-in-the-sky? Our rank and file group has a real set of demands. For example, we should have a real system of contact tracing. We should know, in real time, the number of [COVID-19] cases, the shift time and department of the infected, and when they were detected. All Amazonians must know if they were in proximity of the individual(s), and must be allowed to quarantine with full pay. We need paid time off without threat of termination. We need an end to abusive speed-up and excessive monitoring [time off task, TOT] and tracking. We need immediate reinstatement of hazard pay with

retroactive pay increases.”

He noted that the RWDSU ignored the death of Poushawn Brown, a former Amazonian who died in January. “We have thousands of members, but no one is told when a worker dies.” He added that the rank-and-file group in Baltimore is demanding Amazon release all information regarding her work conditions in the Covid Department, and full financial and medical support to the Brown family.

He told the Alabama teachers, “We have shared interests in uniting our struggles” and quoted from a statement passed by the BWI2 rank-and-file group in February, “Teachers cannot do their jobs in an unsafe environment, just as we cannot do our jobs under unsafe conditions at Amazon. Schools have been underfunded by Democratic and Republican administrations for decades. Why should we trust what these people say about the safety of our schools?” He then shared that his own daughter was infected with COVID-19 two weeks after returning to class.

“We urge you to read our materials and join one of the rank-and-file committees,” he concluded.

A former educator and current SEP member spoke on the developing class struggle in Alabama. She spoke about how Bessemer workers are forced to work 12-hour shifts, sometimes back to back. “Workers have told us of falling asleep while standing up on the job. One worker told me that her entire shift tested positive. Amazon did nothing to mitigate the spread. But workers had little to no confidence that the top-down union push would alleviate these conditions.”

She also reported on the miners’ strike in Brookwood, Alabama, where over 1,000 miners have staged the nation’s first coal mine strike in 25 years. Miners at Brookwood’s Warrior Met Coal took a \$6 pay cut when the previous mine operators declared bankruptcy in 2015. They have worked for the past five years without a pay raise, yet the United Mine Workers of America agreed to a contract with Warrior Met Coal that would ensure only a \$1.00 pay raise, with another \$.50 promised within three years. Yet, each of its top executives was rewarded with six-figure bonuses last year.

“The UMWA rushed to push through a contract that sent these miners back down into one of the nation’s deepest, most gassy and dangerous mines with nothing but a promise to make a mere \$.50 an hour. The workers overwhelmingly rejected this, and sent the UMWA president packing,” she emphasized. Moreover, she noted, “Three weeks in, the miners get, at most, \$300 weekly in strike benefits from the union. The union might as well have held a bake sale or put up a lemonade stand for the miners,” she stated.

“The miners risk their lives daily to haul up the metallurgical coal so prized by steel mills and they have suffered gruesome deaths. Their defiance of the UMWA’s insulting contract with Warrior Met has forced the big-business union to launch a series of public-relations stunts such as the weekly ‘unity rallies’ in order to neutralize miners’ defiance and bring them

to heel,” the AERFSC member stated.

A member of the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Committee spoke up, “Hearing your struggles, it is amazing to me how similar they all are.” She spoke about the oppressive evaluation systems which Tennessee schools are imposing on educators, despite the pandemic. As a teacher, she was marked down for not “engaging” her students, when there were 30 students in a room not fit for social distancing. The administrators have “reduced us to a number,” which follow us throughout our careers. An Alabama teacher concurred, pointing out they faced the same vindictive and retaliatory policies. “A lot of things were wrong before the pandemic, a lot of inequities, but now that we have Covid, it’s much worse.”

Reporting from the current national COVID-19 epicenter, Michigan, a teacher and supporter of the local Educators Rank-and-File Committee told the audience, “We fought to remain remote but at the beginning of year, we lost that battle. Instead we had A, B hybrid. We’ve transitioned 10 times through different modes! It’s been very challenging for our educators, our students and families.

“I am very concerned with the new outbreak. We are dealing with the highly transmissible British strain which is affecting children much more than the ‘wild’ strain. Our positivity rate is now 26 percent, which is down from earlier when it was over 30 percent!” She worries about the long-term impact, stating, “I’ve read that 13-14 percent of infected people have developed diabetes within six months of infection, and one in three have neuro-psychiatric problems. These will balloon in the next several years. How will we handle this? We’ve already got a significant increase in chronic anxiety and depression, which every teacher is seeing in the classroom.”

“As much as it is politically expedient for them to say the schools are not transmitting it, this is absolutely false,” the Michigan teacher said. “Things were bad before the pandemic,” she concluded, echoing her Tennessee counterpart’s report. “The pandemic has just made things worse.”

The Baltimore Amazon worker concluded, “We aim to unite workers, not keep them separate. We urge everyone on this call to read our materials and join one of the committees near you.”

The meeting ended with the Alabama moderator urging everyone to attend the online May Day rally sponsored by the International Committee of the Fourth International. The meeting will issue a call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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