

“We’ve endured disrespect, mistreatment and death”

Montgomery educator denounces firings and COVID-19 case suppression as Alabama abandons pandemic health and relief measures

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The school year draws to a close on unsteady footing at Montgomery Public Schools (MPS) in Alabama. Over the past year, courageous teachers protested the premature, unsafe reopening of school buildings, beginning in October, with no aid from the local Alabama Education Association (AEA). Between November 2020 and January 2021, eight MPS educators died from COVID-19, forcing the school board and superintendent to temporarily concede to fully remote teaching and learning. Beyond the direct attacks on teachers’ lives, the push to turn public schools into privately run charter schools has deepened over the past year.

In response to these developments, a group of educators in Alabama launched the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, wholly independent of the unions and both big business parties.

With summer break less than two weeks away, teachers and parents remain in the dark about the district’s plans for summer school and the fall semester. A teacher, whose name will be changed at her request, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the latest developments.

“They told us there is a teacher shortage, but just pink-slipped a whole bunch of teachers. A pink slip is when they don’t renew your contract. They could pink-slip them over summer just so they don’t have to pay them, and then hire them back in August. The teachers are very upset, but some people feel like it’s freeing, because this year has shown them that they are not appreciated,” said Clare.

“There will be summer school, but we don’t know how. They’re also having an enrichment program for students to catch up from learning loss. Will they put them all together in person or online? We don’t know yet. Also, they are incentivizing teachers and workers to come and work for summer schools with \$50 an hour pay—cafeteria, custodian, teachers. Imagine, for a custodian that’s more money than they’ve ever seen. MPS is using the \$129 million in CARES Act money but not to retrofit schools. The money was supposed to be used to make the schools safe, not to pay people to come into the schools that they’re not making safe.”

Clare spoke of the continued difficulty of teaching students both remotely and in-person at the same time. She said, “I’m teaching sun-up to sun-down. Some days we get a break and some days we don’t, maybe 30 minutes. Just enough time to eat lunch. Some parents are

not available to talk until evening or afterwards, so I have to be available and working 24 hours a day. I’m having a hard time getting everything done.”

“Also, the program we use to teach online, the server now crashes on a regular basis. It may crash during school time, so I’m not able to teach. Or after school, as I’m putting in all the grades, it crashes and I have to do it over again.”

The coronavirus remains a deadly and widespread threat in Alabama, as in the rest of the United States and world, despite the politically-motivated moves by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to normalize the pandemic and mass death by releasing guidelines last week that allow vaccinated individuals to not wear masks indoors.

One independent Alabamian, Frank McPhillips, created a blog to monitor the state’s COVID-19 cases. Frank’s Alabama COVID Newsletter posted on May 15 about an alarming increase in the state’s daily COVID-19 cases. The figures he cites are confirmed by the official data released by the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH).

For the week of May 15, Alabama was one of two states, along with its neighbor Mississippi, where new daily COVID-19 cases increased from the week prior. The average decline in new daily cases across the US was 21 percent, while Alabama’s cases increased by 99 percent. Excluding backlogs, the seven-day moving average of new daily cases in Alabama jumped to 831, more than doubling from 329 three days prior.

The increase was uniform across the state’s counties, with the 10 most populous counties in the state showing a double, or even triple, increase compared to the counties’ prior seven-day averages. In Jefferson County (Montgomery), on May 15 the new daily case rate was 658, compared to the prior seven-day average of 187.

Frank’s Alabama COVID Newsletter notes that as of May 18, “Alabama is now averaging 16.8K doses administered per day, a 19% decrease compared to the week before. It has given at least one dose to 40.7% of the State’s eligible (12 and older) population, which ranks 49th in the nation.”

With 541,000 confirmed cases, at minimum 11 percent of the state’s population has been infected with COVID-19. Experts agree that cases

in the US and worldwide, which would include individual states, are vastly underreported.

Alongside the continued spread of the virus, MPS administrators are trying to suppress information about COVID-19 cases in schools. Clare reported that teachers across the district are aware of COVID-19 cases not being reported. In her school, after two students tested positive for coronavirus after falling ill, the principal tried to prevent the cases from being reported. The school nurse, once informed by other staff, did report the cases to the Alabama Department of Health. This is not unique to Clare's school though, as she has spoken with teachers elsewhere who have seen the same thing. It's going on "in all of the schools. I hear it from other teachers, other staff workers. It's coming from all areas."

Additionally, the level of contact tracing has been further reduced. "They are saying now that we won't contact trace if there is a *possibility* of a case. It has to be proven by a positive test. If the student is sent home with symptoms, they won't contact trace until the parents get the student tested." An immigrant student at Clare's school was sent home sick, with the school telling his parents to get him tested. The family was charged \$125 for the COVID-19 test.

The effect of waiting for a positive test result means the virus can spread for days between the time a child becomes sick and getting results back. "The child has already been around everybody. You have no contact tracing for days."

Alabama, like many states across the US, is taking advantage of the green light by the latest CDC mask guidelines to cut back both on public health measures and on pandemic unemployment assistance. The state's mask mandate expired on April 9, weeks before the CDC guidelines were even released, despite the state's dismal vaccination numbers. Speaking to the priorities of the ruling class, Republican Governor Kay Ivey declared, "Alabama is open for business. Alabama classrooms are open for students. Y'all, Alabamians are getting back to living." Birmingham is the only city to still require masks in public.

Ivey also announced earlier this month that on June 19 the state would end participation in the four federal pandemic unemployment programs, which give a meager \$300 per week to workers unemployed due to the pandemic. Explicitly advocating for pandemic policy based on the interests of the business elite, Ivey said, "As Alabama's economy continues its recovery, we are hearing from more and more business owners and employers that it is increasingly difficult to find workers to fill available jobs, even though job openings are abundant."

Commenting on the announcement, Clare remarked that the message being sent is "screw you if you're sick. Businesses are having a hard time hiring people. Well, they wouldn't have a hard time hiring people if they paid them correctly and protected them correctly. This is a crack of the whip to get back to work."

Such a message is familiar to teachers, who have been left to "figure it out" throughout the past year. Clare noted that the message that MPS has conveyed during this time is, "Don't complain and don't say anything. Teachers are literally disgusted with the profession after this year. I hear people saying, 'I hate what I do now, I never did before.' They're crying because they're having to leave a profession they love or used to. ... Teachers are in the most underpaid position. And now we've endured disrespect, mistreatment and death."

As for Clare, who suffers from long-term complications from a COVID-19 infection likely contracted at work, the district will not allow paid time off to go to the necessary doctor appointments. She commented, "The job screws you over by making you go to work

when you were sick, and now is penalizing you by telling you you will not be allowed to use COVID relief to take care of long-term symptoms. But you have to go to the doctor because you're sick. I also need to pay my bills."

Another important development in Montgomery is the continued push to convert public schools in the district into charter schools. Bellingrath Middle School in Montgomery and Ivy Classical Academy in Prattville, a suburb of Montgomery, received \$1.5 million and \$1 million in grants respectively to fund the charter projects. Both schools are scheduled to open as charter schools in the fall of 2022.

The grants were awarded by New Schools for Alabama, a "charter school support organization" as listed on its website, which itself received \$25 million in grants from the federal Department of Education's Office of Innovation for the purpose of establishing 15 charter schools in Alabama over a five-year period. Montgomery's Davis Elementary is also slated to open as a charter school in fall 2021, and received \$1.5 million in grants.

As the WWS has previously noted, the funds being used to convert public schools into privately-managed charter schools could have been used to retrofit the public school buildings, which are plagued with mold, mildew, vermin and antiquated air systems, and to fund social support services for students, both of which are desperately needed.

Alabama educators, parents and all workers have a continued and difficult fight ahead of them against the government and business elites' efforts to force the population to accept the pandemic, the cutting off of essential financial assistance for the unemployed and the continued attacks on public education. This fight cannot be won within the framework of the corporatist trade unions, which have colluded with national, state and local governments to force workers back to deadly jobs.

We urge Alabama educators, parents and students to join and help build the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to carry forward a genuine struggle in defense of lives and public education!



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