

“Why am I being terminated, defamed and disrespected for standing up for myself and my community?”

San Antonio, Texas, teacher victimized after advocating for safety measures at her school

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The Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will meet this Sunday, May 30, at 1:00 p.m. Central. Register today and invite your coworkers and friends!

On May 10, the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) school board voted unanimously to fire Rachell Tucker, a dual language kindergarten teacher at Highland Park Elementary School. The firing took place after Tucker had advocated for increased safety measures and the halting of in-person learning at her school amid the COVID-19 pandemic. According to *La Prensa*, two other teachers were fired at the same board meeting for unspecified reasons.

Before the school board took their vote, Tucker appealed forcefully to be retained, which can be read in full here. She stated in part:

My name, my career and my livelihood are all being defamed by my administration. The request for termination is the culmination of a campaign of harassment that started only after I advocated for the safety of my students, fellow teachers and my community...

The district made promises to staff, students, parents and the community to get students to come in person. It is now clear there was no intent to adhere to those promises. One example includes the safety measure to close schools if outbreak was rampant. They defined this as a 10 percent test positivity rate. When that number was reached, schools did not close. When it went as high as 26 percent positivity, schools did not close. Instead, you changed your safety plan and pursued the narrative that the ‘community,’ not schools, were the source of outbreak. What are schools to you, if not part of our community? Spread happens at our schools—not acknowledging that simple fact illustrates your deception and culpability...

Why is it so wrong to ask questions of the institutions that we all trust to teach and keep the next generation safe? Why am I being terminated, defamed and disrespected for standing up for myself and my community? Why did people try to convince me to resign instead of stand before

you today? Why do you say we have had a choice all along – when that choice is to leave our profession—our livelihood and passion—if we do not feel safe? This is no choice at all. Why am I being held accountable for the failings of this district?

Tucker was cut off mid-way through her remarks, but her prepared statement called for the board to retain her position “without prejudice or retaliation,” and to wipe clean “any and all punitive measures, including negative evaluations.” Following Tucker’s remarks, numerous parents voiced their support for her, yet the board proceeded to make their unanimous decision behind closed doors. The following day, Tucker was marched out of her school while weeping in front of her kindergarten class.

The firing of Tucker and other teachers demanding stringent safety measures takes place as the political establishment in Texas and across the US, backed by the corporatist trade unions, rush to fully reopen schools and the broader economy in the pursuit of profits.

Gregg Abbott, having previously ordered the homicidal reopening of schools and prematurely lifting mask mandates, has now explicitly forbade the issuing of mask mandates by local and county officials, including in K-12 schools where the vast majority of students remain unvaccinated. This socially murderous policy is set to go into effect in Texas schools on June 5 and was politically prepared by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reversal of its guidance for vaccinated people to wear masks.

The response of the unions has been to fully capitulate to these policies, as well as the broader attacks on the working class. The San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel, the local union of which Tucker is a member, has only issued statements of support and encouraged its members to call board members to demand Tucker’s reinstatement. The National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which the local is affiliated with, and all their state and local affiliates have not even acknowledged the firing, let alone issued statements or organized any resistance.

Michael Hull, another victimized San Antonio teacher and

member of the Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, commented:

As a fellow San Antonio teacher, I extend my solidarity to Rachell Tucker who, like myself, was retaliated against for standing up for workplace safety. I had never had any disciplinary problems with my district until I started speaking up about the unsafe working conditions posed by opening schools during the pandemic.

After I founded the group Teachers Against Dying to oppose the homicidal policies of governments and school boards, I was falsely accused of “staging a walkout.” Upon denying this hearsay, they wrote me up for simply abiding by their “return to learn” plan, which called upon teachers to set aside time to discuss Covid-19. Apparently, telling teenagers not to break the safety requirements due to the life and death consequences caused some distress. According to this backwards logic, honestly describing the risks of the situation was worse than subjecting them to it real life.

After writing a rebuttal to these accusations, administrators frequently popped up in my classes, and suddenly, my grading procedures were called into question. The combination of safety concerns, coupled with the retaliation and scrutiny, became so unbearable that I resigned my position. These tactics are very effective at cowering dissent and discouraging whistleblowers. But, if more people like Tucker would stand up on behalf of their students and communities, there would be more fear on their part for unethical behavior than on our part for calling it out. I praise Tucker and everyone else who had the courage to speak truth to power during this unprecedented crisis. History will honor your brave stance.

The experiences of Tucker and Hull demonstrate the need for the ruling class to stifle opposition wherever it breaks out, as masses of educators across Texas, the US and globally have become radicalized during the pandemic.

As the school year comes to an end for most Texas teachers, the unavoidable reality is that the past year has been nothing short of a catastrophe. Over 2.5 million Texans have officially been infected with COVID-19 and over 51,600 have died, with both figures known to be significant undercounts. Out of those infected, approximately one third are expected to have long-term complications.

According to a recent study by the University of Kentucky, 800 deaths and 43,000 infections in Texas were connected to the statewide reopening of schools during an eight-week period in the fall. These figures represented 12 percent of the state’s total COVID-19 cases and 17 percent of deaths during that time period.

As a result of mounting deaths among teachers, the Teacher Retirement System (TRS) of Texas is months behind in paying benefits to current and former teachers who have died during the pandemic. Barbie Pearson, the Chief Benefits Officer at TRS of

Texas, acknowledged the backlog in an April board meeting, stating that at one point the TRS queue had 2,000 deaths waiting to be acknowledged. According to Pearson, employees processed roughly 230-250 new deaths per week before the pandemic, with the system now averaging 350 deaths per week during the pandemic, with a record of more than 700 deaths coming in a single week.

Suzan Falkner, a 7th grade science teacher whose sister Cathy died of COVID-19 on January 7, stated that after more than four months TRS still hasn’t delivered death benefits owed to her sister and her surviving family. Cathy was a high school teacher in Killeen.

Highlighting the unprecedented stress caused by the pandemic, a question recently posted on the “Texas Teachers for Safe Reopening” Facebook group revealed that at least 30 teachers, mostly women, have suffered significant hair loss as a combined result of COVID-19 infections and stress. One teacher stated, “Mine has been falling out. I think it’s a combo of stress and a post COVID symptom. My hair stylist said she’s been getting tons of clients coming in and hair just falling out in clumps.” Another commented, “Have mercy. My hair is falling out in clumps. Thinking it was hormonal. About to address it with doctor. Not glad we are all going bald but glad it’s not just me going insane.”

Across the state, attacks on teachers’ jobs have been carried out by numerous school districts, with nearly every major school district seeing teachers’ positions being eliminated.

Throughout the past year, the unions have facilitated the resumption of in-person learning at the federal, state and local level and left teachers isolated as they have carried out dozens of protests and wildcat strikes since last fall. The despicable role played by the unions is epitomized by AFT President Randi Weingarten, who has orchestrated the school reopening campaign under Biden and recently stated, “There is no doubt: Schools must be open. In person. Five days a week.”

The Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed last September as part of a national and global effort to build new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers and independent of the pro-corporate unions and big business parties. The pandemic is nowhere near over, and it is imperative that workers expand this network of committees to take matters into their own hands, in preparations for general strike action to close schools and nonessential workplace while providing full economic security to all workers affected. We urge all Texas educators, parents and students to sign up today to join and help build this committee, and to attend our next meeting this Sunday, May 30, at 1:00 pm Central.



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