

Mounting COVID-19 cases as a result of reopenings drive walkouts at Alabama schools, hospital

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In Alabama, opposition is building rapidly to reopening policies which are driving a new surge in COVID-19 cases throughout the state. On Thursday, students at Bessemer City Schools (BCS) walked out of classes to protest the lack of transparency from the district about new cases in the district. On Labor Day, emergency room nurses at University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Hospital refused to clock in for the night shift, saying that they were overwhelmed with unsafe working conditions, staff shortages, and inadequate pay.

Sixteen-year-old Damon Jones was one of several Bessemer City Schools (BCS) students who spontaneously walked out of classes on September 2 after learning of numerous COVID-19 cases among his peers. The school, he said, had not informed him that he had been exposed to these cases. Jones is afraid of contracting COVID-19 at school or bringing it home to his family. His mother told area reporters that he refused to eat at school and that he stopped riding the bus, because other students were not made to wear their masks correctly.

“It’s not safe,” his mother, Quintina Jones, told reporters. “I worry on the daily.”

Damon and his mother had both wanted virtual instruction, but the district only opened a few slots; with only a few days open to apply for those slots, he missed the window. He told reporters from local news stations that social distancing was impossible at school and called for measures such as daily temperature checks and regular deep cleanings.

District administrators phoned parents as the walkout began to inform them that students were planning a protest.

“I was alerted that they were having a little thing out here for COVID because some of the students had COVID,” Amy Diggins, a mother of two BCS students,

told CBS 42 reporters. “So, I called the board. I couldn’t get any answer. I called the school; I couldn’t get an answer. So, I came up here and saw all of this, so I just checked my children out.

“My concern as a parent,” Diggins went on, “is just to close it down until you get it right and put them back on virtual learning, and that’s just it.”

The walkout at Bessemer is a demonstration of growing opposition to the policy of herd immunity among students, particularly working-class students. The city of Bessemer, named after the steelmaking process of the same name, has long been associated with the steel industry in northern Alabama. It was also the location, earlier this year, of a unionization drive by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) at an Amazon facility, which workers voted down by a wide margin when the union made no attempt to connect the campaign to a struggle around concrete demands such as better wages or working conditions.

While district superintendent Autumn Jeter said students would not face disciplinary actions due to the protest, she also denied that there was a problem with either the rate of infection in the district’s schools or the district’s reporting protocol. She insisted that there is “no outbreak” at BCS, and claimed that 98 percent of cases at BCS had been contracted outside of school.

As a conciliatory gesture, the BCS Board declared Friday a virtual learning day, with in-person classes resuming on the Tuesday after Labor Day. This does nothing to address the concerns of parents like Diggins and Jones.

Two weeks ago, 4,337 cases of new cases of COVID-19 were reported in Alabama schools. On September 2, the same day that Damon Jones and other BCS students walked out, Alabama State Superintendent of Education

Eric Mackey reported that there were now 9,000 cases in total. By the following day, that number increased to 9,195 on the state dashboard. In a state where many schools refuse to report cases, this number only hints at the real rate of infection.

At the end of August, hospitalizations statewide closed in on January's record of 3,087. The previous surge was also closely correlated with school reopenings.

The skyrocketing rate of infection has been a predictable and tragic nightmare for the state's hospitals, which were already overburdened and understaffed before the pandemic. On the Sunday before Labor Day, Alabama hospitals reported *negative* 92 available intensive care unit (ICU) beds. More than half of the state's 1,169 ICU beds were occupied by COVID-19 patients.

East Alabama Health, which serves a rural and relatively sparsely populated part of the state, lost 26 patients to COVID-19 in the month of August alone.

The spread of the virus has exacted a heavy toll from Alabama's health care workers. On Monday night, about 25 night shift nurses and other emergency room staff at University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Hospital in Birmingham refused to clock in, citing poor working conditions, UAB's cessation of COVID pay for emergency room staff, and salaries below those of other nursing professionals in the same hospital system.

"We just want equal pay like everyone else in the department," one nurse said to local reporters.

"A lot of us have worked through both COVID surges," said another. "This is round two, and it's been very overwhelming...We're still expected to work at max capacity while also being understaffed."

"We are extremely exposed," she said, explaining that, as they are the first contact with sick patients, they have no idea what patients' COVID-19 status is before treatment. She expressed concerns about the her exposures at work could have on her family. "We do have young children and loved ones at home that we have to take all this home to."

Nurses interviewed by the local press all used words such as "overwhelmed" and "stressful" to describe their working conditions. Alabama nurses are paid, on average, about eight percent less than nurses in surrounding states. Emergency room nurses are paid even less than ICU nurses in the same hospital system. They said that they had channeled multiple complaints through management before walking out.

On August 27, Alabama State Health Officer Dr. Scott Harris, MD lamented that the state was "really in a crisis"

with COVID-19 cases. Harris said that Alabama ranks fourth nationwide in new cases per capita.

Harris laid the blame at the feet of a populace that has overwhelmingly rejected vaccination, masking, or social distancing efforts. "We're seeing this because people don't want to get vaccinated, don't want to change their behavior," he told reporters.

However, while vaccinations and social distancing measures as necessary, governments around the world are attempting to palm the blame for the failure of these efforts on "personal responsibility," when in fact they have sabotaged the comprehensive public health strategies of which they form a critical part. Indeed, as the virus spread last fall, Alabama's Republican Governor Kay Ivey declared, "You can't have a life without a livelihood." In May of this year, Ivey signed into law Act 2021-493, which prohibits all schools, public or private, from demanding proof of COVID-19 vaccination for enrollment or employment. Just last week, Republican State Representative Chip Brown of Mobile pre-filed a bill that would allow parents to opt out of mask mandates in their children's schools.

It is possible to stop the spread of COVID-19, through a systematic, nationwide and international program of vaccination, contact tracing and, most importantly, the shutdown of nonessential production and schools. Medical experts have calculated that such measures, if implemented, could eradicate COVID-19 within the space of two months. However, the political establishment has flatly rejected such measures as a "cure worse than the disease" because they would impinge upon the profit interests of the rich. In fact, state governments as well as the Biden administration are abandoning even the half-measures implemented last year to slow transmission.

Throughout the United States, healthcare workers, teachers, and parents are establishing independent rank-and-file safety committees to raise demands for their safety and economic well-being. UAB nurses and Bessemer teachers, students and parents, must act now to develop their own committees to demand the closure of schools and nonessential workplaces, with full compensation guaranteed for teachers, parents, students and workers.



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