

Georgia school bus drivers protest inadequate COVID-19 protection and low pay

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On September 3, 54 school bus drivers in the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS) in Georgia began a rolling sickout and staged a protest at the school district offices over pay structure and lack of adequate protections from COVID-19. The sickouts forced the school board to scramble for drivers to transport students.

The school relies on about 218 drivers to ferry more than 18,700 students to and from school; the 54 drivers who are protesting represent about 22 percent of the district's drivers. A school district spokesperson reported that the district had been forced to call upon private coaches and other employees with commercial driver's licenses (CDL) to make up for the deficit. The school board released a statement on Friday saying that they were already understaffed, and they were trying to hire more drivers.

"District Administration is working to identify the drivers who did not report to work today and to determine the factors that contributed to their absence," a statement issued by the administration declared. "SCCPSS is committed to working closely with transportation staff to find solutions that support our shared goals of providing quality educational services to the 37,000 children we serve daily."

The bus drivers say that the district is fully aware of the contributing factors. Drivers have been in an ongoing dispute with the district over their pay structure and their retirement plans. SCCPSS drivers receive 24 paychecks per year, as do salaried employees in the district. Unlike salaried employees, bus drivers are paid hourly. Because their hours vary, with some weeks requiring overtime and others with few hours at all, a pay period that ends in the middle of a week can result in a check that barely covers their benefits or fails to pay their bills.

In addition, they have expressed concerns about safety on the buses as the Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus surges in Chatham County. Federal mandate requires masks of all school bus riders. The district, however, refuses to enforce the mandate, and drivers are frustrated at being made to transport students whose parents refuse to wear masks.

"Literally enough is enough. We have tried several forms

of communication as far as sitting in the office, talking to them to try to negotiate some issues and the answer is always the same—we are working on it," protesting SCCPSS bus driver Kendrick Banks told local reporters. "So today, we decided not to move the buses because why? ... we are working on it."

Banks was the steward for Teamsters Union Local 728, the union representing SCCPSS drivers. The union refused to sanction the sickout, and when Banks would not leave the protest, the union dismissed him from his post. Banks resigned from the Teamsters; several other protesters resigned in solidarity with him.

"This is a culmination of years of frustration and anger about how we are treated as bus drivers and monitors of Chatham County," Banks told reporters with *Savannah Now*. "Every time we talk to them, they say, 'we're working on it.' But it just drops after that conversation, and nothing is ever done. It's almost like a slap in the face."

"The parents should be with us," driver Randi Frazier told reporters with WTOG-TV, "...one hundred percent. Teachers, all employees of SCCPSS, they should be with us right now."

Addressing drivers who have continued to work, Frazier said, "I feel they have to do what they have to do. And I feel they should be with us, and we pray for them."

The SCCPSS bus drivers' walkout plays out against the backdrop of a nationwide surge of COVID-19 cases, as well as the expiration of federal programs meant to assist workers facing hardship during the pandemic. Between August 29 and September 11, Chatham County reported a total of 3,206 new COVID-19 cases. On the week of August 30, one of the schools in the district, Beach High School, switched to virtual instruction because of several active cases among staff and students. The district has still not published any data about how many staff and students were infected during that period.

Last Wednesday, SCCPSS held a public meeting where they addressed both the issues of COVID-19 and the bus drivers' sickout. They invited parents and the public to

address the board. While some parents objected to even token nods to mitigation, many others expressed dismay at the district's inadequate response to the virus.

Parent Leora Smith spoke out against lax protections against COVID-19. She called for universal, enforced mask mandates in the schools and on buses. She also criticized the district's transportation logistics. One of Smith's children has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); an empty, full-sized school bus stops at her house to pick up her child every day.

"Why is my kid the only one? Why can't other kids from the Island get on that bus?" she asked. She said the district told her that the other families "did not complain" about the empty bus.

Smith went on to call for a vaccine mandate for all eligible students and staff, as well as daily rapid COVID-19 testing. About the district bus drivers, she contended, "[They] should be paid an exceptional salary because they drive our kids. We need them. I'm looking at an abundance of grants—state, federal, and private—that would fund all these. There is no excuse."

"The school board's not doing enough," said attendee Ben Gilbert. "We need more masks. We need more vaccines."

School Board President Joe Buck, however, made it clear that the board intends to coddle only those parents who object to distance learning and mask mandates. "The vast majority of our parents are in favor of face-to-face learning with masks," he said, "and that is what we are trying to do."

"We will continue to work with the bus drivers," he said of the sickouts. "There are things that we can't do that they are demanding that legally we can't do. We will continue to try to explain those things."

Like most public officials bent on disregarding the safety concerns of school staff, he falsely counterposed the bus drivers' demands to the wellbeing of the district's children, as if SCCPSS students would benefit from increased exposure to COVID-19.

Implying that the bus driver's demands were frivolous, he stated, "There are 37,000 children that need us. All of us are caught up on the things we want, and the kids suffer," he said. Notably, SCCPSS District Superintendent Ann Levett commands a salary of \$322,000. Meanwhile, district teachers are paid a beginning salary of just \$44,800; bus drivers' pay begins at a meager \$30,000.

In reality, the district, not the bus drivers, fails to prioritize the needs of SCCPSS students.

Many children throughout the Deep South have died of COVID-19 since the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year in August. Scores of dedicated educators in the region have likewise succumbed to the virus. Forcing SCCPSS students into classrooms in the middle of a COVID-19 surge

ensures that many more children and teachers will be lost; many others will be traumatized by the loss of classmates and colleagues.

The struggle of Savannah's bus drivers is paralleled by that of New York City's teachers; like the drivers, the city's teachers recently expressed outrage in the wake of a deal between the city and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) to force teachers back into crowded classrooms in the middle of a deadly surge of COVID-19.

These drivers and teachers are a scathing retort to the portrait of American workers painted by the Democrats and their foot soldiers in the unions—that of ignorant masses, too divided to stand together against oppression. The unions, meanwhile, ever more clearly demonstrate their antipathy to the working class. Their interests are not those of workers, but of middle class labor contractors.

The *World Socialist Web Site* reiterates its position that the eradication of COVID-19 is not only possible, but vital to the interests of the public. We support the demands of the 54 SCCPSS drivers. We call, additionally, for the shutdown of schools and non-essential businesses until the virus is eradicated, and we demand guaranteed income and shelter for all workers until that is accomplished. Schools must universally shift to virtual instruction during this period.

We encourage bus drivers to create a rank-and-file safety committee to formulate their demands and organize for struggle. We call upon parents and teachers to support their fight. The drivers' demands are not unreasonable, regardless of what the SCCPSS claims, nor are they at odds with the wellbeing of the district's students. To the contrary, their interests are one and the same. The school board, the unions, and the state and local governments do not stand for the health and safety of workers and students. They represent the demands of the ruling class, which demands that students be herded into unsafe classroom to bolster the profits of Wall Street.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has said, a "trigger event." It has exposed the utterly reactionary character of capitalist society and has underscored the urgency for the international working class to take hold of its destiny. The growing class consciousness of workers is evident in the demands raised by Savannah's bus drivers; their fight is the fight of the entire international working class.



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