

“The only real representation you have as a worker is your rank-and-file committee”

Alabama teacher calls for teachers to organize independently of unions to demand eradication of COVID-19

Emma Arceneaux, Nancy Hanover
14 September 2021

The WSWS conducted the following interview with a teacher from Montgomery, Alabama, where the school reopening drive has led to mass infections of students and teachers. As this semester began last month, over 4,300 cases were reported in schools throughout Alabama—a higher number than at any time during the 2020-21 school year. Last week, there were 9,200 infections reported. Even this is an undercount, with only 58 percent of districts even reporting figures.

The teacher’s name has been changed to Clare to protect her identity.

WSWS: We have described three strategies guiding world governments’ response to the pandemic: herd immunity, which says “let it rip” and allow the entire population to become infected; mitigation, which tries to negotiate with the virus by implementing half-measures that do not stop the spread of infection; and elimination/eradication, which asserts that the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 can and must be stopped. Scientists estimate that the virus could be eradicated in the space of a couple of months if this strategy were correctly pursued. What are your thoughts?

Clare: Eradication is what makes COVID go away. We’ve dealt with this for over a year, we can deal with 2–3 months of shutdown. Vaccines alone won’t eradicate it. You have to isolate the disease itself or it will continue to mutate. We need to make sure support is there for people who need it and not bail out the rich people. If we shut down, we would have less nurses and doctors walking out, less teachers walking out.

Multiple countries have been successful with

elimination. We know what works.

The mitigation strategy is very wishy-washy. It’s profitable for them. It’s not what’s in the best interest of the whole people and it’s driven by greed.

WSWS: What do you think about the role of the Biden administration in forcing the schools to reopen and the current surge of the pandemic?

Clare: The reopening of schools is the biggest source of transmission for this second wave. This is the [Biden] administration’s fault, the government’s. Government wants the big money. They want to appease the lobbyists and the businesses. The politicians do the dance and screw your children. Biden lied to that little girl [during a televised town hall earlier this year] and said everything’s going to be okay.

They already lied by saying get this many people vaccinated and it’ll go away. They did the exact opposite of what science said when they reopened everything and told everybody you are vaccinated, so take your mask off because it’s safe.

They were supposed to get the infrastructure together, get the schools fixed, etc. Instead, they said, “No, we need everyone in schools and we won’t give parents an option.” You can’t point the finger at the unvaccinated when it’s the lack of following CDC guidelines. There’s not just one rule but a set of rules, and you have to follow all of them. They said, “Vaccinate and send them back to school” but most kids can’t be vaccinated!

I told [Alabama Governor] Kay Ivey—it’s not the unvaccinated people’s fault, it’s your fault. You said take your masks off, go to school with no virtual option. I

know people who work virtually but their kids had to go to school. That's how they got the virus. This wave is from reopening schools.

The unions didn't just *not* help us, they stuck their foot out to trip us and knocked us to the ground. Once the union told us they couldn't really help us because they had people on "both sides," it was clear. The union isn't going to help us. They aren't going to go against the school board, because the board allows them to collect our dues. They want our money. They're not making sure we are safe. Eight teachers died last year in Montgomery, at least, and the AEA [Alabama Education Association] didn't say squat.

They are a big business under the guise of a union. They told us, don't come to us in a group, but individually. Divide and conquer. The whole point of a union is to work together. They did nothing with our grievances, anyway. Instead, they put us in a Petri dish, in the schools.

WSWS: What can you say about the role of AFT President Randi Weingarten and her \$5 million "Back to School for All" tour across the United States? As part of the campaign, the union is directing locals to go door-to-door to round up students.

Clare: It is not her job to round students up and tell them they have to go in person. A union is supposed to be about uniting teachers, not rounding up students. Her job is to protect teachers and she's not doing that. Teachers are dying and she's not even mentioning it.

Last year there was no union-led fight on behalf of teachers anywhere in the US.

WSWS: Why do you support the building of independent rank-and-file committees of all workers to oppose these policies?

Clare: The rank-and-file committees need to come together because the unions aren't doing it. The only real representation you have as a worker is your rank-and-file committee.

The working class needs to not be threatened and intimidated by what looks like an impossible task of fighting against big business. When fighting for life, no fight is too big.

We need to band together. If we stop working, they can't do anything. We have to understand our power. Parents, teachers and workers in all areas are running the foundation of this country. We must work together to fight against corporate structure that puts our life at risk.

I spoke to a waiter the other day. He was making \$2.45 an hour, the same wage I did 30 years ago! How does a wage not go up over that period? We used to be able to

keep our tips, now they are even sharing those. Who can live off that? And they're getting exposed to COVID at work.

We read about this in school, like *The Jungle* [Upton Sinclair's muckraking 1906 novel on the Chicago meat-packing industry]. We read about it like it's in the past, but these past couple of years have shown that it's very much alive and well. It's not just corruption but a system of greed that is so pervasive in our government that children's lives are expendable.

It was shown in the beginning of the pandemic that they considered the elderly expendable. People with preexisting conditions, they let them die. They keep saying, "Kids need to be in schools" but it's been proven through wars and past crises that children can overcome learning loss. They cannot overcome life loss.

I felt so bad last year to see how insignificant we teachers were. No matter how much education you have, how many degrees you have, you were treated like trash just for voicing that you wanted to be safe. Teachers resigned or retired, or kept quiet. Now that they shut the teachers up, they are trying to shut the parents up by saying, "You have to pay bills."

WSWS: Which is precisely why the ruling class allowed the eviction moratorium and the federal unemployment assistance to expire as schools were reopening.

Clare: Yes. They need to reinstate the eviction pause. Allow people to live. It's not that hard to do. Eradication makes COVID go away. Shut down for 2-3 months. We shouldn't still be losing family members. I know three people who died last month. The working class has to stop accepting little crumbs and come together to fight. That's the only way we are all protected.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact