

Tennessee teachers support UK school strike and the fight against “herd immunity” policies

Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
28 September 2021

The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee stands in solidarity with parents striking this Friday, October 1, against unsafe conditions in schools in the United Kingdom amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Parents and teachers all over the world must join together to end the unsafe reopening of schools and demand the return to virtual learning until COVID-19 is eradicated globally.

Since the end of July 2021, when schools began to reopen in Tennessee and throughout the southern United States, COVID-19 cases and deaths have skyrocketed to levels exceeding the highs of the 2020-21 winter surge. Once again, hospitals are struggling with the volume of new patients—twice what it was in the winter—with many patients younger and healthier.

As schools in the South reopened without any mitigation measures whatsoever, as has been the case in schools throughout England under the right-wing Boris Johnson administration, it was only a matter of weeks before some schools had to close down due to the numbers of teachers and students who had become sick with COVID-19. At least 12 educators in Tennessee have died from COVID-19 since the reopening of schools, while the number of school-aged children killed by the virus has doubled in that time.

Districts in Tennessee are not tracking COVID-19 cases this fall, claiming everything is back to “normal.” As in the UK, with no reliable data from the state, parents have taken it upon themselves to do contact tracing in Facebook groups in an effort to provide some information about the levels of the virus in their schools.

The accuracy of COVID-19 data provided by school

districts in Tennessee was always in doubt, as officials have hidden behind a willful misreading of the Family Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). In an effort to obfuscate the actual COVID-19 case counts in schools, districts falsely claim that sharing case numbers in schools is a violation of student privacy. However, section 34 CFR §§ 99.31(a)(10) of FERPA clearly allows an emergency exception to privacy when it “is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or other individuals.”

While the ruling class and the mainstream media claim we are living in a post-pandemic world, the 2,000 Americans dying from COVID-19 every day prove the contrary, that we are still in the midst of a catastrophic emergency. Lies and gas-lighting about COVID-19 in schools must end, and accurate data on outbreaks in schools must be made available to the public so that parents and teachers can make informed decisions about their safety.

Opposition to the criminal school policies of the ruling elite is growing. Recently, parents of special needs children in Shelby-Memphis County, Williamson-Nashville County, and most recently in Knox-Knoxville County sued the state to overturn Republican Governor Bill Lee’s executive order that allows parents to “opt out” of school masking requirements. They correctly claim that Lee’s ban violates Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which guarantees access to inclusive education and “reasonable accommodations” to enable inclusiveness for children with disabilities. The federal judge in the Knox County case ruled that mask mandates are a “reasonable accommodation” to allow special needs children to participate to their fullest in an educational setting.

As Governor Lee fights the judgments in Shelby and Knox Counties in court, fascistic elements have already forced the closure of Knox County Schools on Monday, September 27, when the district was to begin requiring everyone in schools to wear a mask.

On Sunday, September 26, an estimated 130 parents and community members gathered in a Knox County park to protest the upholding of the mask mandate. One speaker, a local business owner with ties to the John Birch Society and The Church at Planned Parenthood (TCAPP), called on parents to “...bring Knox County Schools to a screeching halt!” TCAPP is a right-wing extremist organization founded in Spokane, Washington, which was directly involved in the January 6 coup attempt in Washington D.C. Speakers at the Sunday meeting in Knox County had organized groups to go to Washington D.C. and participate in Trump’s Stop the Steal rally which led to the assault on the Capitol.

Administrators and teachers are preparing for parents to send their mask-less children to school. A letter circulated widely in fascistic anti-masking groups on social media, advancing numerous inchoate justifications for defying the court order to mask. Parents are being advised to wait at the door during drop-off for written acknowledgment that their child will be marked absent for not wearing a mask. Some parents are saying they will refuse to pick up their children from school when they are called because their child will not wear a mask. If in-person instruction is best, as many of these parents also claim, one has to wonder how this level of disruption will allow for any significant instruction to take place in this highly politicized and reactionary atmosphere.

While fascistic actors are loud and dangerous, they are outnumbered by the working class who overwhelmingly desire to end the pandemic and have the might to do so. The October 1 UK school strike, called for by British parent Lisa Diaz, is one of many harbingers of the growing strength of the working class. The ruling elites have decided that there is no such thing as too many dead children, parents, teachers, and loved ones, as long as those who survive are generating profits for them. But as workers at Volvo, Nabisco, Warrior Met Coal, Dana, and IASTE in the United States; NSW Rail in Australia; daycare workers in Quebec; and parents in the UK are proving, the

working class has the power to end the cruel and murderous pandemic policies of the elites. We must join our efforts and demand the eradication of the COVID-19 pandemic and an end to the inhumane system that puts profits before people.

The courage that Lisa Diaz has shown to protect her children and all children is applauded and supported by us all. We wish and hope the October 1 action attracts millions. The members of our Tennessee Rank and File Committee wish the best in your efforts. We will follow them closely and share the reporting of your struggle as widely as we can. We stand shoulder to shoulder with you. Your fight is our fight.



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