

# Knoxville, Tennessee, schools ordered to enforce mask mandate

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*At 3:00 p.m. CDT this Sunday, October 17, the Tennessee and Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees are co-hosting a meeting to discuss a strategy to eradicate COVID-19 and put an end to the pandemic. Educators, school workers, parents and students throughout the South are encouraged to register to attend, and invite your coworkers, friends and family.*

On Tuesday, U.S. District Judge J. Ronnie Greer ordered Knox County Schools (KCS) in Tennessee to continue enforcing a mask mandate he had ordered in September, while allowing exemptions with medical documentation and proof that the exemption was in place the previous school year. Following the initial ruling, which had only allowed two exemptions—autism and tracheotomies—the Knox County School Board had requested 60 additional medical exemptions in a list that was so extensive it would have essentially voided Judge Greer’s initial ruling if it had been accepted.

In his latest ruling, the judge admonished the Knox County School Board for its “lack of foresight” at the previous hearing when it had an opportunity to weigh in on what a mask mandate should look like in the district. He noted that the board’s “cry of manifest injustice is therefore at best meritless and at worst disingenuous,” as the district had chosen not to offer a solution to meet reasonable accommodations guaranteed by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) when invited to by the court.

Judge Greer’s September 24 order that masks must be worn in county public schools came as COVID-19 cases surged to unprecedented levels in East Tennessee as a result of the removal or curtailment of all mitigation measures. For example, KCS had removed all mitigation protocols in schools at the beginning of the school year. Moreover, on August 16, Tennessee’s Republican Governor Bill Lee had passed an executive order allowing parents to opt out of district mask mandates.

The immediate occasion for Greer’s order was a filing of lawsuits by four families of children with special needs. The federal judge cited Section 504 of ADA, which protects children with disabilities from exclusion and unequal treatment in schools, saying that a mask mandate is a “reasonable accommodation” that allows students with disabilities to

participate in the benefits of KCS’s services, programs or activities.

In his ruling, the judge condemned the school board’s oversight of safety in schools, saying, “the accommodations currently in place against COVID-19 in Knox County Schools are too hazardously ineffective.”

This is a huge understatement. According to testimony from the medical community, cases “skyrocketed” 600 percent within weeks of schools reopening, more than at any time during the pandemic. Judge Greer cast doubt on the veracity of KCS’s COVID-19 data tracking, stating, “from almost every angle, the record indicates that infections among school-age children in Knox County are charting an upward trajectory. Yet by the Knox County Board of Education’s own tally, the rate of infections is infinitesimal.”

Judge Greer’s finding that KCS was cherry-picking or otherwise obfuscating the count of COVID-19 cases in schools is consistent with what has happened in districts throughout the country as school leaders and unions have forced the reopening of public schools amid a deadly global pandemic that is killing upwards of 1,700 Americans every day.

As soon as the September 24 ruling was handed down, local Republican politicians such as Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs and State Representative Jason Zachary encouraged anti-mask parent groups to violate the judge’s order, with Jacobs calling the ruling “another example of federal overreach,” and Zachary taking to Twitter to encourage parents to defy the court order, writing, “What’s the next step? You send your child to school Monday without a mask. You don’t put a mask on your child.”

With the support of such prominent state Republicans, groups led by individuals who participated in the January 6 fascist coup attempt in Washington D.C., organized a rally on September 26 which was attended by an estimated 130 parents and community members. A widely circulated video shows a member of Tennessee Stands, a fascist group with ties to January 6, calling on the audience to “bring Knox County Schools to a screeching halt.”

That night, parents took to Facebook to give instructions to their children on what to do and say when told to put a mask on by their teachers the next day. One parent proposed a “Trojan

Horse” strategy by which her children would enter class, take off their masks and then refuse to leave, “like a sit-in.” Another parent posted that he gave his elementary school child “full permission to get in trouble.”

Knox County closed schools on Monday, September 27, ostensibly to prepare staff and administration to comply with Judge Greer’s federal order. Teachers in the district said that school administrators instructed them to not fight the mask “battle” as long as students were wearing a mask anywhere on their face. The directive to not comply with a federal judge’s order had been communicated to school administrators by the district leadership at a principals’ meeting.

The defiance of the judge’s order by district leaders is both negligent and illegal. Moreover, it has exacerbated tensions in schools and given students mixed messages about expectations, undermining the routines and order which are foundational to classroom management and a respectful and safe learning environment.

On September 28, teachers and students arrived at school to protesters shouting, “Sheep” and waving signs reading, “Good little sheep wear their masks.” A teacher at a middle school where the protests were concentrated said it was “intimidating” as she drove into work because the protesters were on school grounds despite police presence. This is a violation of district policy C-180.6, which bans political protests on district property that are “likely to cause substantial disruption to the school and its activities or likely to materially interfere with the proper and orderly operation of the school and its activities.”

Evidence of “substantial disruption” was reported by a teacher, who said that once inside classrooms, students began taking their masks off. Rooms for students without masks became so full that teachers were asked to give up their planning periods to monitor unmasked students.

The crisis in Knox County Schools is one example of the anti-democratic lawlessness promoted by fascist groups who are taking over school boards throughout the country.

Tennessee Stands and Open Schools USA (OSUSA), with which American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten held a recent town hall, are part of the “free choice” movement that viciously oppose public schools. These groups’ websites provide tutorials and resources for disrupting school operations through school boards and other pressure tactics.

OSUSA’s members-only website provides tutorials on how to open micro-schools and school co-ops in order to withdraw their students from public schools in order to defund them. Weingarten’s choice to “join together” with an aggressive school choice group like OSUSA propagates the liberal myth that these fascist organizations have more influence and power than they actually do in the working class. According to court documents, 700 of the 60,000 KCS students refused to wear masks on September 28, the first day of the anti-mask protests in the district. The next day that number dropped to

530 maskless students.

That the daily protests organized in Knox County are concentrated at schools in the most affluent zone in the district reveals these groups to be a minority of disaffected petty-bourgeois elements. These groups mirror the class makeup of the January 6 insurrectionists in Washington D.C., some of whom are the small business owners and pastors responsible for organizing the school protests in Knox County.

The petty-bourgeois disruption of school operations has put a strain on already overtaxed school resources. Students are refusing to complete their assigned work and are non-compliant to staff requests as parents become increasingly angry that their students’ grades are falling. One teacher lamented on social media, “Teachers are being talked to like dogs!”

While such fascist groups and individuals are given a hearing at the highest levels of the state government and national union apparatus, they do not speak for the working-class population of Tennessee.

There was widespread opposition to Governor Lee’s mask opt-out order in August. A substitute teacher, who was recently fired for criticizing the school board’s decision to forego all mitigation measures in schools, wrote on Facebook, “Cynically framing an obvious agenda of willful ignorance and selfishness as a righteous crusade for liberty and civil rights and compelling children to act as pawns to advance it, is beneath contempt.”

This sentiment—shared by millions of people both within Tennessee, throughout the US and around the world—must be developed around a political program aimed at fighting to provide for human needs instead of private profits. This requires, first of all, a global fight to eradicate COVID-19. The mitigation and vaccination push by liberals and union officials will not end the pandemic.

New Zealand, Australia and China are proof that only the temporary closure of schools and nonessential businesses, combined with the deployment of all public health measures, can stop the spread of the virus. The working class must unite across the globe to demand eradication measures to end this catastrophe once and for all.

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