

Educators across the US South call for a mass working-class movement to end the pandemic

Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees
22 October 2021

On Sunday, October 17, the Tennessee, Texas and Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees held a joint meeting to discuss the state of the pandemic and the impact of school reopenings in the South and chart a path to mobilize the working class to stop the pandemic and save lives.

Panelists Tony Jackson, Emma Arceneaux and Dr. Benjamin Mateus spoke to the “herd immunity,” mitigation and global elimination strategies respectively, with the disastrous impact of the former two being explored in depth. The viability of a strategy aimed at eliminating COVID-19 in every country was decisively proven.

Those at the meeting unanimously approved the drafting of the statement below endorsing the October 24 webinar, “How to end the pandemic.” All committee members pledged to promote the event widely on social media and among their coworkers.

The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, comprised of educators in Alabama, Tennessee and Texas, call for a mass movement of the working class to fight for the global elimination of COVID-19.

In the past week alone, 2.8 million people were officially infected with COVID-19 and 45,256 people died from the virus across the globe. Soon, the official global death toll will exceed 5 million, while credible estimates of excess deaths place the actual death toll at above 15 million.

The corporate media and governments worldwide are promoting the narrative that the pandemic is all but over, but the numbers of sick and dying across the globe are proof that the spread of COVID-19 is accelerating. As governments embrace and promote a strategy of “learning to live with the virus,” scientists warn that yet another catastrophic surge will be ushered in by the cold of winter.

US President Joe Biden and the Democrats have sent workers and children back into schools throughout the country, triggering a surge in COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths among school-aged children. Nearly 2 million children have been infected, 6,523 have been hospitalized and 200 have died from the virus since July 29 alone. The numbers of affected children in the United Kingdom, Canada, Brazil and throughout the world are just as heartbreaking.

It is imperative that scientists and workers refuse to capitulate to the “herd immunity” strategy advocated by the ruling elite and fight for the global elimination of COVID-19. Only the

mobilization of workers armed with knowledge and objective scientific evidence will put an end to the tragedy of this pandemic and the senseless illness and death that threatens us all.

Nowhere has the ruling elite demonstrated more unapologetic disdain for the health and safety of workers, children and communities than in the Southern United States. Alabama, Tennessee and Texas have been among the hardest hit from the recent surge of the Delta variant.

In **Alabama**, Republican Governor Kay Ivey proclaimed a limited state of emergency as the Delta variant ripped through the state in late fall. Like many states across the country, Alabama allowed its mask mandate to expire at the end of May 2021. Since then, the state’s COVID-19 website has promoted voluntary vaccination and mitigations, but the state has made no organized effort to prevent mass infection.

Schools reopened throughout Alabama this fall, with school districts implementing a hodgepodge of mitigation measures, from “mask optional” to “mask preferred.” As a result, students, teachers and other school workers continue to get sick and die from COVID-19.

Alabama has had 15,000 deaths from COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. According to the Alabama Education Association, there have been 65 reported teacher deaths in the state so far. However, the AEA acknowledges that no one is tracking deaths by profession, so the real number is likely higher.

In **Tennessee**, Republican Governor Bill Lee also allowed all mitigations in schools to expire at the end of May 2021. At the peak of the winter surge in January 2021, Lee forced all schools to reopen, threatening them with a loss of funding if they refused. As a result, unprepared teachers and students flooded back into unsafe schools.

This summer, Lee passed an executive order allowing parents to opt out of mask mandates that schools or districts chose to implement. This order has since been overturned by federal judges in Memphis-Shelby County and Knoxville-Knox County.

As a result of Lee’s “herd immunity” policies, schools have witnessed all manner of disruptions this year, including school and district shutdowns due to the number of COVID-19 infections, and parent and student actions to protest local mask mandates. These disruptions have exacerbated tensions in schools and given students conflicting messages about expectations, undermining the routines and order which are foundational to classroom management and a respectful and safe learning environment.

Currently, an average of 30 people in Tennessee die every week from COVID-19. In the entire year of 2020, fewer than 23 Tennesseans died every week in automobile accidents. While there is no tracking of COVID-19 deaths by profession in Tennessee, at least 21 educators have died from the virus so far this year.

Texas has enacted an even more draconian “herd immunity” policy than either Alabama or Tennessee. Republican Governor Greg Abbott banned mask mandates in schools on June 4, 2021, in order to defend “Texans’ liberty” to mask or not. More recently, he has banned vaccine mandates from all entities, public or private, across the state. The State Supreme Court upheld mask and vaccine bans when challenged by local counties and districts.

The impact on workers and their families from Abbott’s homicidal policies has been brutal. A total of 69,071 people have died in Texas since the beginning of the pandemic, including 40,916 in 2021 alone.

As with Alabama and Tennessee, Texas does not track COVID-19 deaths by profession. The most recent report from May 2021 states that at least 80 educators had died from COVID-19 in the state. That number has likely risen to 150 or more in the intervening months, which saw the Delta variant devastate Southern states beginning in late summer.

In the early days of the pandemic, Republican governors in the South embraced President Trump’s phrase, first coined by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, “the cure can’t be worse than the disease.” In the minds of the ruling elite, “the cure” is costly, life-saving lockdowns, upgraded ventilation systems and other capital concessions that would keep the public safe and healthy. For them, it is better to let the working class risk illness and death than risk a shortfall of profits.

But “herd immunity” is not a strategy for controlling or stopping COVID-19, as the experiences in Sweden, Brazil, the US, the UK, India and other countries have proven. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has notoriously minimized the threat of the pandemic, promoting anti-science myths and conspiracies from the beginning. In March 2020, he told his country, “In my understanding, the destructive power of this virus is overestimated.” Since then, 604,228 Brazilians have died of COVID-19. Only the United States has more dead from the virus, with 751,723 lives lost so far.

The herd immunity policy adhered to by many world leaders and the governors in Alabama, Tennessee and Texas has spread confusion and conspiracy theories within the population through the use of disinformation. These leaders have fostered the most anti-scientific and fascistic elements in our communities and empowered those who would break the bonds of society in the name of individual freedom and profit.

Amid the tragedy and chaos of the pandemic, we are starting to see an upsurge of opposition in the working class to the ruling elite’s brutal policies and the massive social inequality which predated the pandemic.

The pandemic can only be stopped through the independent mobilization of the international working class. The October global school strikes initiated by British parent Lisa Diaz have been an important initial step in this fight, signaling the demand of the international working class for an end to the “herd immunity”

strategy embraced by the ruling class.

Since the reopening of school this year, 59,000 children in the UK have become ill with COVID-19. These children will potentially suffer the long-term effects of the virus for months and years to come. The ruling class wants us to believe that thousands of workers dying every day is the solution to the pandemic. But as Lisa Diaz said, “There is no ‘living with COVID’ because millions of people will end up dead. Millions more will live with the debilitating symptoms of Long COVID. ... We need a Zero COVID strategy. There is no middle ground.”

As a result of the urgency of the situation and the outpouring of support they have received, Lisa Diaz and the UK parents have now issued the call for weekly strikes, which our committees fully endorse. The role of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees around the world, from the US to Sri Lanka, has increased their militancy and determination.

The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees support the UK school strikes, which represent the demand of the working class for humane policies that put people before profits. This call for safe, disease-free schools is originating from the working class, not the unions which work with world governments to force students and teachers into classrooms so that parents can get back to work.

The unwillingness of the unions and the Democratic and Labour Parties to do anything but safeguard the profits of the corporations is proof of the urgent need for a movement of the working class to end the pandemic.

We call upon all educators, parents and students in Alabama, Tennessee and Texas who agree with our demands to help us build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees across the South as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Sign up today to get involved.

On Sunday, October 24, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the IWA-RFC are hosting an online webinar featuring scientists and epidemiologists who will explain the case for the global elimination of COVID-19. Register now to learn more about what must be done to end the pandemic. Invite your coworkers, family and friends, and share this event widely on social media!



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