

Tennessee health officials and teachers union ignore rising COVID-19 death rate among educators

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Tennessee teachers and school employees are dying of COVID-19 at an increasing rate but local school districts, the state government and teachers unions have put little effort into publicly reporting who is dying and why.

This was among the conclusions of a recent story, “COVID death toll among Tennessee public school employees rises,” by the *Tennessee Lookout*, an online publication comprised of veteran journalists previously employed by some of the state’s largest daily newspapers.

Between the reopening of Tennessee’s schools this year—some systems as early as August—and October 22, at least 27 employees had died of COVID-19, the publication reported. That includes three in Rutherford County, one of the fastest growing counties in Tennessee, adjacent to Nashville/Davidson County, the state’s capital.

“It’s a toll that steadily climbed as the school year got underway,” the *Lookout* reported. “In August, seven Tennessee public school employees died after contracting COVID. Fourteen employees died in September. Thus far in October, the *Lookout* has confirmed the deaths of five more public school employees.”

As of October 22, there had been nearly 1.3 million confirmed COVID-19 cases in the state and 16,1585 deaths.

The American Academy of Pediatrics reported COVID-19 cases among children peaked nationwide in September. Between the weeks of September 2 and September 30, over 1.1 million cases were reported among children.

The Tennessee Department of Health reported 205,000 cases among children 5 to 18 years old as of October 15, with the highest spike in cases happening in the second half of this year, according to Action 5 News.

And as of October 5, 20 children have died of COVID-19 in the state.

Meanwhile, there has been little reporting on cases of “long haulers,” those whose symptoms and problems persist for weeks and sometimes months after an infection. The accepted rule of thumb is that as many as 10 percent of

COVID-19 victims are “long-haulers,” including children and adults.

The pandemic has killed more than 748,000 in the US, more Americans than World Wars I and II combined, with an estimated 15 million excess deaths worldwide.

“In the United States, where the trade unions have collaborated with the far-right to reopen schools, nearly 2 million children have been infected, 6,523 hospitalized and 200 killed since July 29,” the WSWS reported last week. “No one knows how many teachers have died.”

The group “School Personnel Lost to Covid” has reported more than 1,600 deaths.

Most disgusting in the *Lookout* report was the lack of official and union interest in documenting these COVID deaths among educators.

“Public acknowledgment of the deaths of educators from COVID-19 is rare and the Tennessee Department of Education does not keep track of such deaths,” the *Lookout* reported. “The Tennessee Education Association, the union representing teachers, is typically alerted when TEA members pass away, but has no way of knowing the underlying causes for every death nor do they routinely receive word on the deaths of public-school employees who are not TEA members.”

That the TEA has apparently done little or nothing to change this slipshod healthcare reporting for its own members and other school workers is not mentioned but speaks volumes about the organization.

Both the National Education Association (NEA), the TEA’s parent organization, and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have vigorously defended the reopening of schools as “safe” despite scientific evidence of the dangers to not only students but teachers and all school employees required to teach and work in poorly ventilated, overcrowded buildings and with the vast majority of their students unvaccinated.

As the WSWS reported, when the NEA, with 3 million

members, met for its convention in July there was no “In Memoriam” to remember the members and school workers who had died in the course of the worst public health catastrophe of the last 100 years.

New NEA head Becky Pringle (salary \$325,900) and other top NEA officials said nothing of the deaths but provided a wealth of platitudes about “resilience,” “creativity” and “love.” As for teachers dying of the virus and the living struggling with politicians, businesses and school boards bent on reopening schools no matter what, she offered no support.

AFT President Randi Weingarten (salary \$500,000) in late spring issued what amounted to an ultimatum to the AFT’s 1.7 million teachers.

“There is no doubt: Schools must be open. In person. Five days a week,” she said, adding, “We can and we must reopen schools in the fall for in-person teaching, learning and support. And keep them open. Fully and safely, five days a week ... Given current circumstances, nothing should stand in the way of fully reopening our public schools this fall and keeping them open.”

Schools have been reopened not to provide a safe, quality education for children but to serve as poorly ventilated holding pens for children so their parents can be forced back to work even as the pandemic continues to rage. Teachers and school employees, like cafeteria and maintenance workers, are expected to work in dangerous conditions. Bus drivers are forced to bring children in and take them out again several hours later into the community and back to their families. As the weather grows cooler, drivers will have to work in close, poorly ventilated conditions with unvaccinated children.

Weingarten has admitted to the child-care role of schools. “Parents rely on schools, not only to educate their kids, but so they can work—like the 3 million mothers who dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic,” she said.

Neither Weingarten and Pringle nor the NEA and AFT, nor their state-level affiliates like the TEA, will lead educators and school workers out of this dangerous morass.

“These immense bureaucracies had ample resources to raise the alarm at the start of the pandemic by educating and mobilizing parents, educators, students and workers nationally. Instead, they dutifully collaborated with both big business parties to reopen schools,” the WSWS explained.

Once the nation’s ruling class decided that workers must return to work there was a concerted effort to downplay the number of deaths. There have been multiple instances of under-reporting of COVID infections and deaths.

One of the most egregious came to light in January when it was revealed that Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s administration had manipulated reporting

requirements to undercount the total number of deaths in nursing homes and long-term care facilities by 50 percent

In Virginia, the *Virginia Pilot* newspaper reported that the state Department of Health was forced to take down and then update its COVID-19 “dashboard” after the newspaper—though the efforts of its reporters—revealed a “vast discrepancy” and undercount of 500 cases in children.

There is a reason for this. To accurately and widely report COVID-19 deaths and infections would undermine the task of forcing workers back to work and their children back into dangerous school settings. The media and the trade unions seek to inculcate a willingness to abide death and suffering to generate profits.

The Republicans and Democrats cannot be trusted to point the way forward, and the trade unions are their willing assistants.

To implement a program to end the pandemic and eliminate COVID-19 it is essential that workers in schools, communities and every industry form rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles across state and national boundaries. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has been established for this purpose.

Teachers and other school workers have formed the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to coordinate this fight across the state. All educators and other workers who wish to fight to save lives should sign up today to join or build a committee at your school or workplace.



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