

Southern educators, parents and students must act now to close schools to stop the spread of COVID-19!

**The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees
13 January 2022**

An emergency meeting of the regional Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees (SERFSC) was held on January 8 to discuss the alarming spread of the Omicron and the need to give our full support to the courageous stand taken by Chicago teachers. A record number of teachers, parents and workers from states across the South attended.

The meeting was held as new cases of COVID-19 across the region have reached or exceeded the previous records of the last two years. Those attending the meeting expressed their determination to stop the criminal spread of the virus and reported on their workplace conditions.

Speaking at the meeting, a pre-K teacher in Virginia said that after having been exposed to the virus, “My boss told me that because I’m vaccinated and don’t have symptoms, I should come to work. I told them absolutely not because I work with infants, [there is] no way to stay six feet away, and they can’t wear masks.”

A teacher in Alabama told the meeting, “You pay dues and the union does nothing to protect you. It’s garbage. Teachers are retaliated against for reporting cases. We’ve had good nurses and staff, but if they abide by rules, they’re gone soon and there’s a new nurse who lets anything ride.”

An art teacher in Arkansas shared, “I applaud Chicago. My family in Kansas—schools in her town are closing. I feel jealous.” She continued that almost no students and many faculty do not wear masks at her school. “It’s terrifying to go to school. There are no protections for teachers unless they take it upon themselves. I have a booster, but I also have family members that I worry about spreading the virus to. Aside from anxiety about getting COVID for myself, I’m more afraid of giving it to people in my family who have no defense at all. I feel like I am in the Twilight Zone.”

Nicholas, a doctoral candidate in North Carolina, gave his support to Chicago teachers. “The teachers’ sickout in Chicago is extremely heartening. The government and CDC have obviously abandoned the population. Seeing that happen in Chicago and spreading is really extremely heartening.”

The meeting attendees affirmed the following resolution:

We call upon educators, parents, students and other workers

across the South to organize and take up the fight to immediately close schools to stop the transmission of COVID-19 and save lives.

We give our full support to teachers in Chicago, who voted overwhelmingly last week to teach remotely in order to protect their lives and those of their students and communities. Although teachers remain determined, their so-called union, the Chicago Teachers Union, colluded with the school district and the Democratic administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot to call off the remote work action that was democratically decided and forced teachers back into the school buildings before they had a chance to vote on the rotten agreement signed by the CTU and the district.

We also support the growing wave of students organizing across the country to demand remote learning and protect their lives—from New York City, to Oakland, Seattle, Massachusetts and Missouri.

To bring these struggles into a unified, mass movement, we call on educators, students and other workers to join us in building rank-and-file safety committees today at every school and workplace. These committees are independent of the treacherous unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, which have played an integral part in allowing schools to reopen amid a deadly pandemic, and independent of both big-business parties.

These committees allow us to share information, to communicate with educators across the country and globe, to counter the lies of the media that “schools are safe” and “Omicron is “mild,” and to work in coordination with each other to lay the foundation for joint, collective action across the region and nationally to guarantee our demands are met.

Our local committees, as part of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), also enable us to build the broadest possible support in the working class internationally. We affirm that the international working class is the only social force capable of putting an end to this pandemic, securing high quality working conditions for ourselves and high quality public education for our students.

We also direct our call for joint action with bus drivers, food

service workers, janitors, and other school support staff, hospital and nursing home workers and all workers being ravaged by COVID-19 due to the criminal indifference of the corporate and political establishment, which has prioritized its own profits over our lives from the beginning of this pandemic. They have stuffed their pockets while our families, co-workers and students have fallen ill and died!

We also appeal to university staff and students to form committees in your school and fight for remote instruction until transmission is stopped.

The situation in the South is dire in every state. Educators and other workers face chaos in our workplaces with mixed and contradictory messages about safety procedures. We must make life-and-death decisions every day as we choose between our own safety, the safety of our children, and the need to go into unsafe workplaces to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table.

According to the *New York Times*, on January 10 the three states where cases are rising the fastest are in the South: Mississippi, Texas and South Carolina.

According to Johns Hopkins University, between January 3 and January 8, **Mississippi** saw a record-breaking 42,810 new cases. ICUs in the state are at 85 percent capacity, and the positive test rate is currently 43 percent. Only 48 percent of Mississippians are double vaccinated, and only 16 percent triple vaccinated, while the Omicron variant's ability to evade immunity means that three doses is the new "fully vaccinated." There are no statewide mask mandates. On January 6, Republican Governor Tate Reeves stated, "We are not going to have any mandates. We are not going to have any requirements forced on you by the state." However, the state is forcing one mandate on the population: Go to work, get sick, and don't complain!

In **Texas** there were 44,000 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 on January 7. The state's positivity rate is 35 percent, while only 18 percent of the state has received three shots. A headline in the *Houston Chronicle* on January 9 read, "Omicron is on track to shatter Texas Covid-19 hospitalization records." More than 50 ICUs in the state are at 100 percent capacity, with some cities like El Paso reporting no available ICU beds. Pediatric hospitalizations have surpassed the previous peaks. As Texas's Republican Governor Greg Abbott begins his campaign for reelection, he is sticking to the criminal strategy of "personal responsibility" and vaccination-only to combat Omicron. His fascist ban on mask mandates in schools remains.

Last week, **South Carolina** recorded 72,932 new cases, a record for the state. Only 53 percent of South Carolinians have received two shots, and 15 percent have received three. The state has broken its record for new cases four times in two weeks. The state health department released alarming case numbers for January 8 through January 10: 16,630 on Saturday, 15,234 on Sunday, and 12,827 cases on Monday. An average of

81 people are dying each week from the virus since the end of December, and hospitals are seeing an increasing number of COVID-19 patients requiring critical care and ventilators. Republican Governor Henry McMaster's school mask mandate ban was overturned by a federal judge, but mask requirements are haphazard throughout the state.

To save lives, educators must take matters into their own hands. In addition to building committees in every school, we have specific demands that must be implemented immediately. Our demands are guided not by what the politicians or businesses are willing to concede but what is *necessary* to save lives and prevent the lifelong debilitation of children.

We urge educators to fight for the following:

- The immediate closing of school buildings until the rank-and-file committees, with the advice of trusted scientists, determine that it is safe to return
- The implementation of and funding for high-quality remote education
- Financial support for parents who must stay at home with their children
- Financial support for all workers and small businesses that are affected by temporary lockdowns
- A program of mass vaccination globally, including of children
- A program of mass testing and rigorous contact tracing, including the establishment of readily accessible testing centers in each city and town
- For the CDC to reverse its capitulation to big businesses and reinstate a 14-day quarantine for all infected and exposed individuals, with full financial and social support
- Mandatory masking with KN95-grade or higher masks in all public places. These must be provided free of charge to workers.

- A science education program directed at the working class conducted with the assistance of scientists and physicians
- To pay for these demands, a tax on the billionaires and the expropriation of the pandemic profiteers to meet the needs of society and carry out a Zero COVID program globally.

Those who agree with this program should sign up here to join or build a committee, share this statement with your co-workers, become a voice of opposition in your school, and attend our next meeting on Sunday, January 23, at 4:00 p.m. ET. Reach out here for more information: southerneducatorsrfc@gmail.com.



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