

Southern US educators and students meet to discuss campaign for remote learning

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The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees (SERFSC) held an emergency meeting on January 23 to discuss the spread of COVID-19 in schools and the wave of walkouts by teachers and students internationally.

Emma Arceneaux, a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site* and member of the Socialist Equality Party, gave a presentation that placed the emerging global struggle into context. In the US, over a million children were infected with COVID-19 last week, while thousands of schools have had to temporarily close due to mass infections of educators and students. She displayed a photo collage of 15 educators across the South who have died of COVID-19 in just the last month.

She presented a map that showed the cities and countries where student and teacher walkouts have taken place in the past three weeks, arguing that the struggle against school reopenings is fundamentally international and must be fought on that basis. She showed videos and read quotes from students who participated in the protests, which exposed the cynical, lying claims of the politicians that students must be in school for their mental health and to prevent learning loss. The example of the unmasked and armed police being used as substitutes in Oklahoma proves that keeping schools open is neither about education nor well-being.

Arceneaux played a video interview of Jared, a Chicago high school student, who told the IYSSE, “CPS has decided not to enable remote learning in this time of need, and we need to secure the safety as well as rightful education of all students at CPS. Mental health is important, but we need to actually be safe and secure before we can focus on our mental health. If we’re sick, there is not really space to focus on mental

health.”

Finally, she brought attention to the fact that the federal government is actively trying to suppress COVID-19 data, with the Department of Health and Human Services no longer requiring hospitals to report daily COVID deaths. This comes as at least 1,150 pediatric deaths have been recorded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as of Sunday.

In the discussion, educators were asked to report on their working conditions, how reopenings have impacted students, their thoughts on the student walkouts and the international character of the struggle.

Everyone in attendance voiced their full support for the courageous stand taken by students and teachers across the globe and expressed a strong desire to forge an alliance to combine the struggle into a national and international strike.

A teacher in Alabama reported, “They started state testing this week. They are making students go report to the building to test. Students are questioning this: ‘Will we get in trouble if we don’t go? Because I don’t want to.’ They are scared to go into the building.” She endorsed the walkouts in Chicago, New York and elsewhere, “The walkouts are necessary, and I wish everybody would. You have to love teaching to be a teacher. I miss being in the classroom, but I’m not going to put my health on the line.”

A university student in Florida reported on the thwarting of a planned student walkout by Broward County school officials: “... the school board threatened reprisals against any students participating. Students would have been punished, and the school district reinforced security personnel and police officers to block the school entryway and lock students inside the buildings.”

He explained that the Broward students had issued an

open letter to the school board on social media, demanding a return to remote learning for at least two weeks, the provision of N95 masks to all students and staff, and weekly PCR tests for staff to isolate and contain COVID-19 outbreaks. The school district released an email to parents saying all advocacy efforts for better safety protocols are prohibited, signaling that school officials are willing to ally with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's fascistic policies. The use of police and security to suppress opposition to the deadly school reopenings confirms that education authorities, with the support of the teacher unions, will go to violent lengths to defend the politicians' back-to-school agenda.

Educators confirmed that students' education, as well as their physical and emotional well-being, are suffering from the school reopening drive.

A Texas high school teacher reported, "I am a teacher of American and World History. I've been covering for government and economics teachers. I don't have a curriculum. There has been no learning. We were operating at 50 percent under the best of circumstances."

A preschool teacher from Virginia said, "I don't see the situation getting better. They put subs in my class. According to Virginia law, the ratio in my [infant] class is 1:4, the sub had 6 babies by herself for 2 hours. I was really upset about this, and they didn't even tell the parents."

Another Alabama educator noted, "Subs come and then they leave. Subs come in and then walk out because they can't social distance in the class. Here, in Alabama, a lot of school systems have shut down in the last two weeks because there aren't enough staff to cover classes."

At the end of the meeting, the committee called a vote to issue a statement in support of the students and to raise the demands for the immediate closure of schools, for transparent and daily COVID-19 data, and for the removal of police from classrooms. The statement is forthcoming.

Arceneaux raised the fact that no other political tendency, organization or publication aside from the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* was seeking to educate the working class on the scientific nature of COVID-19, on the political nature of the struggle to end the pandemic and striving to unite

the working class on an international basis.

The meeting concluded with the call for educators to help build the committee by bringing their co-workers, to host discussions at their school to develop a core group of opposition and to join the Socialist Equality Party.



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