

Expand and unite the global student and teacher walkouts into a mass movement against COVID-19!

Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees
1 February 2022

The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees are holding our next meeting on February 6 at 2 pm CST. We urge all educators, students and parents throughout the South to register today and invite your coworkers, family and friends.

Last Sunday, the Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees (SERFSC) held a regional meeting to discuss the wave of student and teacher walkouts across the US and Europe, the impact of the disastrous spread of COVID-19 in schools, and the need for an immediate switch to remote learning. We reviewed the increasingly desperate and authoritarian attempts by the government and school districts to hide the spread of COVID-19 and keep schools open as daily new cases continue to break records and deaths from Omicron are set to exceed those from Delta.

Our joint committee believes that an international, unified mass movement is necessary to carry out a struggle against the “herd immunity” policies of the ruling elites in the US and globally. To this end, we affirmed the need to widely expand the network of rank-and-file committees into all districts and schools throughout the South.

The SERFSC give our full support to and stand in solidarity with the teacher and student walkouts and strikes in the United States and Europe and call for them to be expanded into every city, country and continent.

In the US, the primary reason that a nationwide walkout has not been organized to stop the dangerous school reopenings is because the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have systematically isolated local strikes and sickouts, while playing the key role in

pressuring teachers to accept the most minimal mitigation measures as justification for going back into unsafe schools.

Our own region illustrates the fact that the unions work to divide us. In East Baton Rouge, the local NEA chapter (the EBRPAE) called a one-day sickout under pressure from rank-and-file teachers. But the local AFT chapter (the EBRPFT), condemned the sickout. In Birmingham, it was the local AFT chapter (the BFT) that called a sickout, while the Alabama NEA chapter refused to mobilize its members in support. In neither case did the national organizations give support to, let alone announce, the local sickouts on their websites or social media pages.

We affirm that the unions are not the means to carry forward our struggle to save lives. We must take matters into our own hands, independently of the unions, and build our own organizations, the rank-and-file committees.

From Tennessee, to Alabama, to Texas to Virginia, our experiences in the classroom refute the politicians’ hollow concerns and lies that learning loss and students’ mental health are the reasons for keeping schools open in person. With record numbers of our coworkers out sick, our schools are scrambling to put any “warm body,” as one teacher put it, in front of the class, whether or not they have experience. In other cases, our students are being herded in auditoriums with multiple other classes, where no instruction is provided.

Additionally, multiple states in our region have either banned or severely curtailed remote learning options, so when students have to isolate or quarantine, or the entire school shuts down because of an outbreak, the

students are not able to receive any instruction at all.

Our students are also suffering from the ongoing anxiety and fear about contracting COVID-19 and spreading it to their families. They see their classmates fall ill one by one and worry whether “they are next.” Countless of them have been infected with a virus that can cause debilitating long-term symptoms.

We also discussed the scandalous development that amidst record infections, hospitalizations and a rising death toll, the federal government is trying to reduce COVID-19 data reporting. We condemn the decision by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to stop requiring hospitals to report daily in-hospital COVID-19 deaths, which goes into effect on February 2. This sets a dangerous precedent for states and municipalities to further erode the public’s awareness of the spread and impact of the disease.

This comes at a time when child cases and hospitalizations are soaring. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, over 1.15 million children were infected during the week ending January 20, including nearly 380,000 in the South alone. Last week, another 808,013 children were officially infected, including almost 240,000 in the South. At least 45 children died from COVID-19 over the past two weeks, which is known to be an undercount because multiple states do not report deaths by age group.

The move by the HHS to stop counting the daily hospital deaths is intended to conceal the mortal threat that COVID-19 poses to us. Multiple states in the South have already drastically curtailed COVID-19 reporting. At the beginning of January, Tennessee reduced reports from daily to weekly, while Florida did the same last summer. Obscuring the data in this way emboldens the efforts to minimize the danger of COVID-19, propagated by the media, the far-right and the entire political establishment, providing cover for the ruling class to force workers back to work.

We also want to sound the alarm about the increasing use of police state measures to keep schools open. Oklahoma recently approved unmasked and armed police officers to substitute in classrooms. Arizona has enlisted the National Guard to fill in for sick teachers. In Broward County, security was called in to block exits in the schools to prevent a student walkout against unsafe conditions due to COVID-19, while the district threatened the student protesters. Just as there is no

limit to the number of deaths the capitalist class is willing to accept to protect its profits, it is prepared to use any means necessary to keep schools and workplaces open.

In response to these developments, we raise the following demands, in addition to our previously specified demands:

- The reversal of policies that allow police and national guardsmen to be substitute teachers. Police and military have no place in our classrooms!
- That HHS immediately reverse its decision to end mandatory daily death reports from hospitals.
- That the federal government, through HHS and CDC, require all states, municipalities and hospitals to submit daily death and case reports, and that the public have access to this information in an easily accessible and comprehensible manner. We have a right to know exactly how many people, including children, are contracting and dying of COVID-19 each day.

In addition to our demands, we also call on students who have entered into a struggle for their lives to turn to the working class for support. Pleas to the politicians and school boards will fall on deaf ears. But calls for support among workers in the auto, health care, logistics, food service and other industries will be eagerly taken up. The entire working class is suffering under the compulsion to risk our lives or lose our livelihoods.

We also encourage students to become involved with the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, which is fighting to unite students and workers in a common struggle internationally.

We urge educators and parents throughout the South to reach out to our committee, to attend our next meeting on February 6 at 2 pm CST, and to take up the call to build a committee in your district.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact