

Teachers organized sickouts, rank-and-file committees against school reopenings

# Lessons of the Montgomery, Alabama teachers' fight against COVID deaths in 2020

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30 January 2023

Two years ago, Montgomery, Alabama educators carried out sickouts against the resumption of in-person learning in the midst of the pandemic. Four educators died from the disease over three days, January 19-21, following three who died between late November and December. An eighth educator died on January 28.

The Montgomery struggle was a major experience in the working class's early fight against the pandemic. The teachers began organizing in the fall of 2020, mounting a series of sickouts and protests, including at the state capitol, the historic site of the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march. They formed the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, participated with the *World Socialist Web Site* in exposing the deadly rampage of the virus, and forced the school board to temporarily switch to remote learning.

Since then, the wave of teachers' struggles has continued across the globe, including significant strikes in Australia, Canada, Brazil, Venezuela, Portugal, the UK, Greece, Italy, France and more countries. Teacher walkouts throughout the US were also supported by student strikes in New York City, Oakland, Seattle, Boston, Chicago, Washington DC and elsewhere.

In the fourth year of the pandemic, the ongoing fight for safe and sustainable working conditions, an end to the pandemic, and resources for public education requires drawing the lessons of these struggles.

## **"This is the first time we had that courage"**

In the summer of 2020, former President Donald Trump branded educators as "critical infrastructure workers" in order to force schools to reopen amid the earliest surge of the pandemic in the US. This campaign was built on a pack of lies, including that children did not spread SARS-CoV-2, that infections in children were harmless and that schools could open safely without comprehensive measures to prevent airborne transmission. Trump was operating on behalf of the business interests of Wall Street and the ruling capitalist class, which, having funneled trillions of dollars into the markets through the CARES Act, needed schools open so that parents could be forced back into factories to produce profit.

This campaign was met with immediate opposition by educators, who carried out a wave of protests in August 2020. Demonstrations took place in Nebraska, Arkansas, New Jersey, Utah, Louisiana and Nevada. Later in the school year, over 20,000 Chicago teachers resisted being forced to return in-person as infections were skyrocketing.

On October 13, 165 teachers in Montgomery held their first wildcat sickout on the day students were set to return to classrooms, accompanied by a protest outside of the district's central office.

The teachers, who organized themselves under the slogan "No Plan, No Personnel," explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time, "Teachers are used to plans. There are no plans in place for dealing with this. Nothing has been centralized. There's no leadership. The governor passed it on to the state superintendent, who passed it on to the district superintendents, who passed it on to the principals."

Teachers reported that the district denied high-risk teachers medical accommodations; that buildings were in terrible condition with mold, mildew, and even bats and snakes; that they were forced to teach two lessons at once (virtual and in-person) without commensurate compensation; and that, despite most families opting to stay virtual at the time, teachers were not allowed to work from home.

It was immediately clear that reopening schools meant people would lose their lives. As reported by the *Alabama Political Reporter* at the time, multiple teachers had contracted the virus at work and tragically spread it to their elderly parents, who then died.

In the face of this grave threat, the Alabama Education Association (AEA) was doing its part to suppress opposition and keep teachers divided from one another, in line with the national policy of the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT). As early as April 2020, AFT President Randi Weingarten and Lily Garcia, then-president of the NEA, gave support to the Trump administration's plan to reopen schools. Since then both organizations have nakedly downplayed the pandemic's impact on their own members and on children, and have endorsed the abandonment of mitigation measures in schools.

As one teacher stated, "The AEA told us to stop acting as a group, to turn in complaints one by one, and that's how they would 'help' us. They've just broken up our momentum and the power of group consciousness. That's how they stop us."

Teachers defiantly took matters into their own hands. "This is the first time we had that courage," said one teacher. "It was unheard of, no one had ever stepped out like that. We won't be bullied anymore. Our lives are on the line."

On November 20, the group held a second "Safer at Home" rally on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol, an ironic reference to Republican Governor Kay Ivey's "Safer at Home" pandemic orders which kept schools and factories open on behalf of the interests of the Business Council of Alabama (BCA). They served as a pole of attraction for others in the state, with teachers driving from Huntsville to join.

Teacher Natalie Wright spoke powerfully at the rally about the need for the working class to unite to stop the reckless reopening of schools and nonessential production. She said, “Because employers basically need parents to return to work, and parents are having to go to work to continue their livelihood, it looks like we’re in a fight pitted against each other. That shouldn’t be! We are on the same team, fighting for the same thing, parents and teachers and all workers.”

“Plant workers, automobile workers, Walmart workers and Burger King workers—all workers need to come together. Yes, you want your children to go to school so you can go to work, but our government has given trillions of dollars and that needs to go to employees, to provide income security, job security, food security.”

In the final days of November, two Montgomery Public Schools employees died of COVID-19: Morris Pitts, a custodian at Jefferson Davis High School, and Dr. Ennis McCorvey III, assistant principal at Lee High School. In December, Rodney Scott, the girls basketball coach at Robert E. Lee High School died as well.

Meanwhile, teachers were dying across the state of Alabama, including Nadine Patton, school counselor in Birmingham; Julie Yeager, math teacher in Shelby County; Bobby Stutts, bus driver at Colbert County Schools; Leo Davidovich, special education teacher in Odenville, and many more.

When teachers gathered in large numbers at the following school board meeting, demanding to work from home so that no more lives would be unnecessarily cut short, they were met with contempt from the board members, who did not even acknowledge the deceased at the meeting. Teacher Ebony Wilkes was interrupted by board president Clare Weil, who callously said the issue of protecting lives was “off topic” to the discussion of building construction. Weil, it is worthy of note, owned five UPS stores at the time and had business interests directly served by the BCA’s “Keep Alabama Open” campaign.

It was after these experiences that the group of teachers who led the opposition made the important decision to form the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, in order to mobilize educators across Alabama and connect the struggles of teachers to those of the broader working class. The committee was formed independent of, and in direct opposition to, the AEA and the Republican and Democratic Parties, which represented the business interests that demanded lives be sacrificed for corporate profit.

At the end of January, following the reopening of schools after the Winter break, four educators died over three days. These included Dwayne Berry, administrator and football coach at Robert E. Lee High school; Lushers Lane, Capitol Heights Middle School PE teacher; DeCarlos Perkins, Park Crossing High School coach; and Lesley Ames, Booker T. Washington Magnet piano teacher. Michael Floyd, history teacher and coach at Montgomery Academy, died the following week.

Educators responded with another wildcat sickout, causing mass absences across the district. Superintendent Ann Roy Moore was forced to carry out an about-face. While this was a testament to the strength of the working class, it was a tactical retreat on the school district’s part. Indeed, teachers were still required to report to school buildings once per week and attend in-person faculty meetings, and schools were forced open again only two months later.

The response of the AEA to these developments was particularly cynical. It was the independent initiative of the teachers that forced the hand of the district, but the AEA tried to claim credit after the fact. The union’s statements following the educators’ deaths merely stated that the losses were “unfortunate” but that the AEA did not wish to “point the finger or allege blame.”

## Lessons for today

Another critical lesson during this time was the role of the Democratic Party. In 2020, it was clear to tens of millions of workers across the US that the Trump administration’s handling of the pandemic was top-to-bottom anti-scientific and homicidal. In large measure, it was popular demand for a rational and life-saving response that drove 81 million to vote for Joseph Biden, who as a presidential candidate promised to “follow the science.”

Biden’s real agenda proved immediately to be an extension of Trump’s. One of his main priorities was for every US school to be open in-person within the first 100 days of his administration.

It was under his administration that schools reopened amid the catastrophic Delta and Omicron waves, which led to record infections, hospitalizations and deaths among children. The vast majority of pediatric deaths during the pandemic have occurred under Biden’s watch.

According to CDC data, by September 2021, there were 500 child deaths; today that number stands above 2,000 and grows each week. The CDC itself has contributed to the cover-up of the pandemic by overseeing the systematic dismantling of COVID reporting and testing, and the abandonment of mitigation measures, including in schools.

As for Montgomery, and Alabama as a whole, all of the promises for protections and safety have proven empty. Over 21,300 have died from COVID in Alabama, including at least 61 school workers, among them teachers, bus drivers, nurses, custodians and administrators, according to an unofficial tracker.

In a recent national survey conducted by the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, a teacher in Montgomery reported that cases of COVID and other respiratory viruses were surging, yet information was being suppressed and mitigations had been abandoned. Describing the current building conditions, the teacher wrote, “Terrible ventilation. Rat, roach and bat infestation. The school is covered in mold and mildew.”

By every measure, the pandemic remains out of control globally. In Alabama, the XBB.1.5 variant, the most transmissible to date, is spreading across the state. The toll of repeated mass infection is mounting; data from the CDC indicates that Alabama has the second-highest rate of Long COVID in the country. Information has been purposely withheld from the public, including with the dismantling of the Alabama K-12 COVID Dashboard last April.

The past two years prove that the entire political establishment is hostile to even the most basic of workers’ needs. Throughout the world, the ruling elites are carrying out “social murder” both via the pandemic and through war, while gorging themselves on unprecedented profits. Oxfam recently reported that billionaire fortunes are increasing by a staggering \$2.7 billion a day, while workers struggle to buy groceries and put fuel in their tanks. There is no let-up in sight. The working class can only go forward by ending this rapacious economic system of capitalism.

Further, the trade unions, run by corrupt bureaucrats, coordinate their every move with politicians and employers. They are a chain around the ankles of the working class. Workers must organize independently and advance their own program to fight for a scientific, international Zero COVID policy, and for a reorganization of society based on human need, not profit.

Montgomery workers were in the forefront of the Civil Rights struggles, exemplified in the Selma-to-Montgomery marches and the Montgomery bus boycott. Today the fight must be broadened to secure all social rights—life, a future without poverty and war, and social equality. This is the fight of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the Socialist Equality Parties. Join today.



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