

“Capitalism is being exposed for what it is”

The school transportation crisis in the age of coronavirus

By Nancy Hanover
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“This is getting scarier by the day. They want to get everybody back to work. It’s like sending cattle to the slaughterhouses,” a veteran school bus driver, “Laura,” told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I’ve been a school bus driver since 1994. I’m 60 years old, and I am very worried about going back before this virus is contained. COVID-19 cases are spiking in Pennsylvania, and so are hospitalizations,” she continued.

Educators and school workers across the United States are horrified at the demand that they be guinea pigs in an “experiment” on the reopening of schools, in the words of Dr. Anthony Fauci on Tuesday.

The science continues to point to the homicidal character of a return to school. The pandemic rages out of control without a vaccine or adequate treatment in sight. This week a study from JAMA Pediatrics further undermined the notion promoted by the Trump administration that children will not transmit the virus. The study showed that children under five with mild to moderate symptoms of COVID were found to contain *higher* concentrations of the virus than older children or adults. The first study of its kind, another JAMA report, demonstrated that school closures in the US between March and May were associated with a significant decline in COVID-19 and fewer deaths.

School transportation may be the single most daunting obstacle to even the most minimal infection control, although every scenario for a return to school risks widespread community transmission. The existing school bus system, serving up to one half of the nation’s schoolchildren, is not in any way designed to impede COVID. The National Council on School Facilities and Cooperative Strategies says that a 56-person bus should only hold seven children without masks; that number only goes up to 28 if everyone wears masks.

Replying to this idea that all the students will sit calmly with masks on, Peter, a veteran of the 2013 New York City school bus drivers’ strike, told the WSW: “The kids inside the bus aren’t going to sit with distance. They will take off the mask and ignore the bus driver. It doesn’t work that way. If they don’t want to do it, they don’t do it. They already dispute everything you say. It’s usual stuff. They are children, not soldiers.”

Moreover, the costs associated with social distancing and bus transportation are out of reach for many, if not most, districts. The *New York Times* reports that Marietta, Ga., plans to spend \$640,000 to hire 55 monitors to check students’ symptoms before they board, and Dundee, Mich., expects to spend over \$300,000 to add routes. In Odessa, Texas, there are plans for buses to run on continuous routes, like city transit, with students arriving and leaving school at staggered

times.

With most school bus drivers over the age of 55, those who opt to stay home this fall will be substantial, calling into question the ability to staff even the standard routes necessary for districts.

“All over the nation there was a shortage of bus drivers, pre-COVID,” Laura said. “Now a lot of us are retiring. It’s going to be chaotic. There’s a lot of older drivers with health issues and compromised immune systems. I am worried. I saw that an 8-year-old child with no preconditions, entirely healthy, contracted COVID and died.”

She went on to detail how buses will inevitably become sites for disease spread. “My district has a list of safety protocols. We are supposed to have the cabin fan on all the time, facing towards the back of the bus with the windows open.

“Of course, that doesn’t make sense, facing backwards pushing the virus onto the kids or facing forward. Neither one. What about inclement weather? If it’s snowing or raining, we’re to keep the windows open? Then we’ll need the fan facing forward to defrost windows. I am positive they have not retrofitted these buses so that the heating or air conditioning could handle the virus.

“The district is not allowing for social distancing on buses. They say there must be two people per seat. The CDC said there should be six feet spacing between students, but they’re not doing that. Our larger buses hold 84 or 72 passengers, three to a seat. The kids, in rows, are about a foot apart and right behind me, too.

“Parents are asking about social distancing on buses, suggesting kids could be in every other row. But that would mean increasing the routes to pick up the excess kids. It seems like the district scrapped that idea. I am going to be asking questions about all this. Not that I think it will do anything. I think they hoped that the summer heat would diminish COVID, and now they’re suddenly scrambling to get ready as the virus gets worse.”

Speaking to the recent AFT convention, Dr. Fauci noted that students will be closer to the driver than six feet, and should be wearing masks. “We would hope that there’s a policy in your district that gives out masks and has the child have a mask on before they get onto the bus,” he said in words conveying little more than “a hope and prayer.” He concluded, “I would encourage you to get the authorities in your district to do that because you don’t want to be having a child come in and be exposing others if the child is infected without any symptoms.” This amounts to no policy whatsoever.

In point of fact, there are fifty states with fifty reopening plans interpreted by thousands upon thousands of superintendents and

principals, all being driven by Wall Street's demand that the entire workforce needs to get back on the job ASAP.

The chaotic and underfunded state and local policies mean districts will require drivers and teachers to perform numerous cleaning tasks and coronavirus screening. For example, Massachusetts recently announced that, in addition to driving and supervising social distancing among students, drivers and/or monitors "should be trained to observe students for potential coronavirus symptoms as they enter the bus."

"We are supposed to clean the buses after every use, sometimes 2 or 3 times a day," added Laura. "The district will provide PPE, gloves, cleaning agents, cleansing cloths, etc. We do not know how much time will be allotted for each cleaning or whether we will get full pay rate or lot man's rate, which is \$7 less than the half-rate of our pay."

"Before the schools closed, we were given a choice to opt out of cleaning, which I did! Now when we go back, I am assuming we will have to do it ourselves. Personally, I think they should keep a professional cleaning crew on staff. But we all know how that will work out."

"In 2012, our school district outsourced transportation to Students First because of the cost of retirement. Now, drivers don't get into the Pennsylvania State Employee Retirement System. For those already in PSERS, whatever time we had is static now until retirement. Also, the benefits now are bad, and health insurance is expensive. Our union, the Teamsters, let it happen. They wouldn't let us fight. Instead of working for us, the district and the union were all in it together to outsource our jobs."

"The unions aren't doing anything now about COVID. You'd think they'd contact us about the situation. All it is, is dues."

Peter concurred with these thoughts: "I have to go to work. I need the money, even with unemployment. They cut our medical insurance, so I have to take the risk. All of us are losing money. I came to the US in 1975. If had a wife or children, there's no way I could provide them with a home. I'm in the ATU 1181. They are with the company. They tell us they'll fight but do nothing."

"After the strike in 2013, we went back for less than the previous contract. The Labor Department told the company they must pay us for 40 hours/week. But the truth is we work 45+ hours per week; they ignore the 5 or 6 or 7 extra hours. There is no way to do the route in that time."

"We sometimes sweep the floor, but that's not cleaning. They need to disinfect the bus to kill the coronavirus. How are they going to do that? What will that cost? I don't think they'll do it. They'll say the driver is going to clean it. But there is no way for us to fumigate it. Someone comes on with coronavirus and then everybody gets it."

Although there is no comprehensive list by occupation kept in the US, *Education Week* has posted notices of educator deaths from COVID. During the spring, this included a number of school bus drivers. These include Eugenia Higgins Weathers, Fayette County Public Schools in Lexington KY (April 4); Marlon Alston, Holy Family School in Chicago (April 7); Bryson Kent Bowman of the Greenwich School District, Connecticut (April 7). Frank Massey, of Belleville High School in Illinois (April 17); Gerry Genuino, 58, the Fair Lawn Public Schools in NJ (April 21); and David Akridge, 69, Taylor County School District in Campbellsville, KY (May 30).

Lelonee Gibbs drove for the Camden County Schools in Georgia for 20 years. When he died April 2, Gibbs, 44, was not driving, but the district honored his long service to the children by staging a parade of school buses past the home of his mother.

Laura pointed out the underlying political calculations behind reopening schools, stating: "It doesn't surprise me that Trump labeled school workers as 'essential.' It's runaway capitalism. They have enough money to budget for the Pentagon, but nothing for the people. Look at our health care. It's a sham. Big Pharma and the health care insurance industry run it."

"They are starting school because they need parents back to work. They need to make money for the rich. We shut down from March to June. All the Republicans, some Democrats too, were pushing to get us all back to work. The CARES Act went to help those who didn't need it, instead of those who need it. Yesterday on the news, I saw Pennsylvanians still trying to get on unemployment, trying since March! Now the moratorium on mortgages [defaults and evictions] is going to end."

"My husband had to go back in the middle of April, deemed 'essential' for grounds maintenance, but he has diabetes and sarcoidosis, and has to worry about that. We are in a situation between a rock and a hard place. A lot of people will lose homes, and it's not our fault."

"Capitalism is being exposed for what it is more and more. Now we see in these protests, Trump sending border patrol people after citizens. He did the same thing in Washington, DC, violently getting rid of protesters to go across the street and hold up the Bible. I don't think Trump will leave office. You see, he's going after the postal service. People won't be able to mail in their ballots, on top of that, they're cutting the number of polling places. I never thought 2020 would be like this. It really is scary."

"It's past time [to change the system], should have been done a while ago. How do you do it short of restructuring Congress or a revolution? When the teachers struck in 2018, the unions worked with the administrations."

"I am disappointed with the Democratic Party; I always voted Democratic. But they are all working for 'the man,' not the people. Look at the situation with healthcare and the Obama administration. They are all puppets for the capitalist state. That's who we need to fight, the elite that has the power and money. I am very interested in how to form a rank-and-file committee and join the Socialist Equality Party."

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