

Colorado leads state government attacks on US teachers

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State governments throughout the US have recently passed legislation attacking teachers' jobs, living standards and working conditions as part of a nationwide assault on public education. New laws include measures targeting tenure and other job protections for educators, broadening the scope of privately funded charter schools, and increasing the use of standardized testing.

The Obama administration is spearheading this attack through the "Race to the Top" funding pool, in which states compete for funds by seeing which can impose the most regressive measures against teachers and public schools. In conducting these attacks state officials and the White House have counted on the collaboration of the teachers' unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of teachers, and their state affiliates.

Driving the recent flurry of legislation is the second round of federal Race to the Top funding, a pool of \$3.4 billion available only to states that show they are willing to increase "accountability" in education by dismantling teacher protections and expand access for charter schools. Only two states, Tennessee and Delaware, received money from the first round, prompting state governments to use legislation to force through changes opposed by teachers. The second round of applications were due June 8.

One of the most punitive pieces of legislation was in Colorado. On May 20, the state's Democrat-controlled state legislature passed and Democratic governor Bill Ritter signed into law State Bill 191, which overrides teacher tenure and seniority and places heavy emphasis on standardized test scores. After Colorado finished in 14th place in the first round of applications, Ritter had attacked the process as inscrutable and biased. Yet he supported new legislation directly targeted at improving the state's score in the current round.

The law is based on the same reactionary premise

upheld by President Obama and his education secretary Arne Duncan: that teachers, not cash-strapped and overcrowded facilities or impoverished conditions facing working class children, are responsible for "failing schools." Thus only punitive measures—like the firing of the entire teaching staff in Central Falls, Rhode Island—can assure "accountability" from teachers.

Under Colorado's new law, fifty percent of teachers' annual evaluation will be based on the "the academic growth of the teacher's students." Teachers would need three consecutive years of positive evaluations to earn tenure, and educators rated "ineffective" two years in a row would be stripped of tenure protection and revert to probationary status.

In effect, the jobs of educators at already low-performing schools would be most in jeopardy, increasing turnover at the schools that can least afford it. Veteran teachers displaced from jobs have two years to find a position before being fired, but teachers and schools must approve their placement under a "mutual consent" system.

What is involved here is an attempt to replace higher paid teachers with lower-paid, less experienced teachers. There is a nationwide attack on tenure for teachers, to make it much easier for teachers to be fired at will. This will make it much easier for districts to lower wages. Moreover, the threats against more experienced teachers are aimed at breaking the resistance of teachers to the assault on public education, the introduction of ever-greater levels of inequality and the increasing privatization of schooling.

The bill originally designated that growth would be measured by state standardized achievement testing. Supposedly as a concession to teacher's unions, that language was changed to allow any standards that are "rigorous, comparable across classrooms and aligned with state model content standards and performance

standards”. However, the effort and expense of creating alternative standards that “align with the state model” means that, in practice, virtually every teacher will be measured by state tests.

In a move with national repercussions, the Colorado branch of the American Federation of Teachers supported the bill. While the AFT represents few teachers in the state, it is the nation’s second largest educators union. It is working closely with the Obama administration in supporting his “reform” measures against teachers.

US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan publicly praised the Colorado branch’s support of the bill. “I want to commend the Colorado Federation of Teachers for showing courage and leadership and putting children first,” Duncan said. “We all know that teacher evaluation systems around the country aren’t working. They’re not working for adults. They are not working for children. We have to be willing to think differently. I commend them for having the courage to work on this.”

Duncan and the Obama administration are promoting the lie that attacking teachers and teacher pay somehow benefits children. Duncan’s support for the Colorado bill echoes nearly word for word his support for the mass firing of Rhode Island teachers. In that case, too, he thanked local officials for “showing courage” for indiscriminately firing unionized workers who were then only rehired when their union agreed to impose longer working hours with less job security. These direct legislative attacks are coming at a time when 100,000-300,000 teachers may be laid off this year as a result of state and local budget deficits around the country.

The larger Colorado Education Association officially opposed the legislation. However, after the bill passed, the CEA sent out a news release saying it was “pleased with a number of the amendments that were added.” Furthermore, the CEA worked closely with Governor Ritter and other Democrats in Colorado’s first round application for Race to the Top, and supported the creation of Governor’s Council on Educator Effectiveness in January, the body responsible for creating and overseeing the new teacher evaluation systems. The CEA also supported Democrats voting for a recent bill to increase employee contributions and cut benefits from the teacher pension fund.

In all these cases, the CEA sought to channel mass opposition among teachers behind the Democrats. It then presented the passage of the bills as evidence of the

success of this strategy, based on minor concessions and the fact that some Democrats voted against it. In fact the opposite is the case. The Colorado bills all passed with the support of key Democrats in the state legislature and were all signed by the Democratic governor. The author of the most recent bill was Democrat State Senator Mike Johnston, cited by the *New York Times* as “an alumnus of Teach for America who worked on the Obama campaign, rallied support from business executives, civil rights leaders and many school groups.”

The Democratic Party administration at the federal level is spearheading all these attacks, targeting teachers far more ruthlessly than the previous Republican administrations, in large part because of the collaboration of the national union leadership. Under these conditions, the CEA, like its counterpart, works to prevent any independent political mobilization of the working class.

Other states passed similar bills to aid their Race to the Top applications: Louisiana passed legislation removing a cap on the total number of charter schools in the state, which had been set at seventy.

Maryland passed a similar bill to Colorado, designating half of a teachers’ evaluation on standardized tests. Again, the AFT affiliate, Baltimore Teachers Union, supported the state’s plan, while the statewide NEA affiliate opposes it.

In Oklahoma, Senate Bill 509 takes effect immediately and gives school administrators much greater authority to restructure or fully reconstitute chronically low-performing schools, permitting more mass firings of the kind seen in Rhode Island. A second bill would base teacher evaluation in part on student achievement gains. Earlier this year, the state removed caps on charter schools.



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