

Tennessee's legislative onslaught against teachers

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As part of a coordinated union-busting effort spearheaded by rightwing politicians in numerous states throughout the US, Republican state legislators in Tennessee and the state's newly installed Republican governor Bill Haslam have introduced a series of bills aimed at smashing teachers' unions and driving down their wages.

The Republican Party made historic gains in the Tennessee state elections last November, taking over both chambers of the General Assembly as well as the executive for the first time since the Reconstruction Era following the Civil War. However, the legislative assault against teachers and basic social programs in the state is the product of both the Republicans and Democrats, and parallels similar developments in many states, including Florida, Indiana, Ohio, South Carolina, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and others.

On March 14, Haslam unveiled his budget proposal during his State of the State address. Haslam alluded to cuts of \$896 million to the \$30 billion total budget but avoided a detailed outline. Higher education is slated to be cut by \$20.2 million, or 2 percent; hospitals will be subjected to a 4.52 percent gross receipts tax that will reduce state outlays for TennCare, the joint state- and federal-funded Medicaid program for the poor.

These and other cuts were planned by former Democratic Governor Phil Bredesen and approved by the legislature last year. The budget reductions were justified by the expiration of federal stimulus funding.

The cuts are not simply the result of state or federal deficits. Rather, they are part of a long-term strategy followed by the American ruling class, in the form of both major parties and all of the major corporations, to boost corporate profits by forcing permanent wage reductions upon American workers.

Indeed, at the same time that Haslam and his counterparts throughout the country are pulling out empty pockets for social programs, the Tennessee legislature and governor have pledged to permanently ban income taxes in the state. The governor has sought to expedite tens of millions of dollars in grants and "incentives" to businesses, including a

\$97 million grant to kitchen appliances manufacturer Electrolux. Such policies place the burden of tax revenue generation squarely onto the working class and the poor, through regressive sales taxes on food, gas, and other necessities.

In his speech Monday night, Haslam declared that the financial cuts "are not a temporary condition. I think that what we are seeing in government today really is the 'new normal.' Every government, ours included, will be forced to transform how it sets priorities and makes choices."

The most controversial of the bills circulating through the legislature proposes to end collective bargaining rights for public school teachers. At present, teachers are the only state employees that have such rights, having won them through legislation passed in 1978. Proponents of the bill are exploiting this situation by declaring that the measure is necessary to restore fairness. The Tennessee Educators Association (TEA), the principal teachers' union in the state, in keeping with the now-standard trade union practice of isolating workers of various professions, is unwilling to meet such a demand for "fairness" with the obvious rebuttal that real fairness would mean enforcing collective bargaining rights for other state workers as well.

Teachers in Tennessee are already paid less than the average for state employees, and they generally experience less job security. The new measures will impact the job market for the entire working class, however, exerting downward pressure on wages in every sector except the top income bracket. They also threaten to accelerate the deterioration of the system of public education, the viability of which is openly challenged by the same rightwing forces that are behind the proposed legislation.

On Saturday, March 5 TEA held a rally in Nashville attended by at least 3,000 teachers and supporters in spite of heavy rain. Over 200 more rallied in Johnson City, where March 5 was a snow make-up day in the schools and the Board of Education refused to grant teachers permission to attend the rally in Nashville.

In a form letter that the union urges its members to send to

legislators, the TEA declares it supports education “reform,” and opposes the legislation not because it will lead directly to reductions in teachers’ wages and working conditions, but because it will “weaken the ability for [teachers] to have a voice in what changes need to be made to improve education in our state’s classrooms.” Implicit in the statement is the fact that the TEA is not, in principle, opposed to reducing teachers’ wages, raising class sizes, or other policies of the Obama and Haslam administrations.

On March 5, a counterdemonstration reportedly of 350 was held by the Tennessee Tea Party. Tea Party activists have been harassing and taunting Republican state legislators that have not yet come out in favor of the anti-collective bargaining bill. Haslam himself has also yet to take a position on the bill, wary of provoking a reaction similar to what Wisconsin governor Scott Walker has met with.

Tennessee teachers’ wages are lower than those of Wisconsin teachers, and union membership in Tennessee is much lower than in Wisconsin. TEA chief lobbyist Jerry Winters cravenly suggested the possibility of a compromise, saying, “I think the fact that [Haslam] is not taking a position in support of these really divisive bills is very much to his credit.” The *Tennessee Journal* more realistically suggested that Haslam is playing the “good cop” to the Republican legislators’ “bad cop.”

The impotence of the union is most strikingly illustrated in the fact that the very same far-right forces that are driving the assault against teachers are able to simultaneously posture as the teachers’ defenders by emphasizing the incongruity between teachers’ interests and those of union officials. Tennessee Tea Party president Tammy Kilmarx remarked, “The big union bosses make a ton of cash. I think most of the teachers don’t even understand where their dues are going.”

Governor Haslam himself introduced a bill that proposes extending teachers’ probationary period for tenure from three years to five, and making the maintenance of teachers’ tenure status depend on their performance according to evaluation criteria to be set by the state board of education. Those criteria will no doubt relate to students’ performance on standardized tests. Tenured teachers who perform poorly on such evaluations can be returned to probationary status. Haslam claims that the measure is necessary to facilitate the removal of ineffective teachers.

Like the anti-collective bargaining bill, it is also clearly aimed at further driving down teachers’ wages and working conditions, and it amounts to a substantial step in the direction of abolishing tenure entirely. Yet, far from acknowledging it as such, the TEA merely states that it opposes the bill because it “will be based on an evaluation

system which has neither been implemented nor proven to work. Teachers who teach in subjects without student achievement data are left wondering how they will be evaluated.” Once again, the TEA demonstrates through its arguments that it is not opposed in principle to pay cuts for teachers. The bill passed the state Senate on Thursday.

The TEA, like many other organizations that have been targeted by the right wing in recent years, regularly donates funds to the campaigns of Democratic Party candidates. This strategy has not only failed to protect rank-and-file union members from the legislative onslaught; it has provided grist for the mill of the rightwing demagogues who make a profession out of demonizing sections of the workforce with better wages and job security to the end of widening profit margins for their corporate paymasters.

Presently the Tennessee legislature is considering a bill to prevent unions from making political donations. This measure, aimed primarily at undercutting Democratic Party election campaigns, while leaving in place generous campaign donation allowances and loopholes for private and corporate donors, will have the effect of shifting the electoral slate ever further to the right.

A related bill would prohibit payroll deductions from public employees to unions and other associations that take part in lobbying activities and/or make political contributions.

Another bill, which has already passed the Senate, would strip the TEA of its power to appoint its members to the Tennessee Consolidated Retirement System board. Another proposes to allow Tennessee parents to opt their children out of extracurricular school activities.

Yet another proposes removing the cap on the number of charter schools in the state, allowing open enrollment in charter schools, and relaxing regulations for the establishment of charter schools. This bill complements Tennessee’s First to the Top Act, signed last year by former governor Phil Bredesen, which spearheaded Tennessee’s successful bid for federal funding under the Race to the Top, a program aimed at closing schools with low average scores on standardized tests and replacing public schools with charter operations.



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