

Tennessee attacks teachers, funds charter operations

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As the Tennessee legislature pursues a slew of bills aimed at curbing collective bargaining rights and cutting teacher compensation, Republican Governor Bill Haslam has announced a multimillion-dollar project to create 40 privately run charter schools in the state.

The plan funnels \$40 million into half a dozen charter school management organizations, to build one of the first statewide charter school systems. Some \$20 million of the funding comes from the private Charter School Growth Fund and the Center for Charter School Excellence in Tennessee. Another \$14 million is from the state's First to the Top program, modeled after the Obama administration's Race to the Top; the remaining \$5.8 million comes from a federal Investing in Innovation grant that rewards schools for fostering "partnerships with the private sector that will provide matching funds."

The governor's announcement, coming two years after the state legislature raised the limit on charter operations from 50 to 90, is part of an ongoing attack on public school teacher rights, tenure, and compensation. Last year, Democratic Governor Phil Bredesen instituted a law that ties 50 percent of teachers' job reviews to student improvement. Job reviews for the other half of teachers are based on the evaluations of their schools' principals.

Public school districts around the state, staggering from insufficient funding, have closed schools, consolidated operations, and laid off employees for the past few years. Because of the lack of state income tax revenue, many school districts are facing insolvency. On March 9, for example, residents of Memphis voted to dissolve the City School Board into the less populous but better-funded county district, the Shelby County Board of Education. The move triggered a lawsuit and

countersuit between the two administrations. Memphis schools serve 100,000 children, 87 percent of whom are low-income and are dependent upon the schools for subsidized lunches and basic supplies. Shelby County oversees 47,000 children, 37 percent of whom are low-income.

As school districts implement cuts to staff and programs and increase class sizes, student test outcomes often worsen—for which teachers, in turn, are penalized. This weakened position of public schools is then used as a justification for the introduction of private, for-profit operations to take their place.

Of bills currently pending, the most provocative piece of legislation, similar to the bill rammed through in Wisconsin earlier this month, would have ended collective bargaining rights for public school teachers. On March 16, House Republicans in the Education Subcommittee passed a modified plan to allow for collective bargaining over base pay and benefits, but not on layoffs, transfers, or over so-called "merit-pay" schemes that tie compensation to test scores or other school performance measures.

Governor Haslam, who had previously been circumspect on the bill, praised it after the House subcommittee passed it on Wednesday. "It gives superintendents greater flexibility in making personnel decisions and supports my central focus of doing what's best for children in Tennessee classrooms." The House speaker, Republican Beth Harwell, added, "This is a good bill for teachers. This is an opportunity for teachers who are good to show that they are and to be rewarded for it. This is what we owe the taxpayers of this state."

Although they are paid on average less than other state employees, teachers are the only public sector workers who have collective bargaining rights in

Tennessee. In addition, school workers constitute a large section of the state workforce and public education funding is a large portion of government spending. Because of this, the rights, wages and working conditions of teachers are seen as a primary target in the offensive against the compensation of all state employees and the working class more broadly.

Thousands of workers and students have demonstrated against the anti-collective bargaining bill over the past two weeks, dominated by the teachers union, the Tennessee Education Association (TEA) and pro-union liberal groups.

Far from fighting against the attacks on its rank-and-file members, the TEA has implored the legislature to keep the union's place at the table in negotiating cuts and claw-backs. Beyond calling after-work rallies, the TEA has limited protests to a form letter to legislators in which it asserts its support for education "reform"—a euphemism for the rampant closures, privatizations, and takeovers of schools spearheaded by the Obama administration's reactionary Race to the Top policies. (See "Tennessee's legislative onslaught against teachers")

After the bill passed, TEA spokesperson Jerry Winters told the Nashville *City Paper* that the union would withhold any opposition until after reviewing the bill. "Obviously, we're pleased that they're not moving forward with a total repeal of the law," he commented. "That would be the Draconian thing to do. We feel pleased that at least there is some discussion of a middle ground."

In addition to restricting collective bargaining, the legislature is also seeking to remove TEA officials from the public education's pension oversight board and to eliminate the dues check-off. A separate bill would ban any union donations to political campaigns, a measure aimed at undercutting the Democratic Party in the elections.

Last week in his State of the State address, Haslam announced cuts of nearly \$900 million from the \$30 billion state budget, carrying forward a 2010 plan drafted by his Democratic predecessor Phil Bredesen.

Haslam also pledged a pay raise for teachers and other state workers. It would be the first time teachers have had such a raise in about 10 years, and yet it is just enough—a mere 1.6 percent—to account for last year's unusually low inflation rate. The increase adds

insult to injury for an education workforce that is paid well below both the national average for teachers and the state average for other public sector workers.

At the same time, the governor plans to cut some 1,200 state jobs. Half of these positions are already standing empty because of budget cutting in previous years, and Haslam stated that funding for the rest, mainly in mental health treatment, are to be cut at the end of the year as federal grants run dry. The Associated Press reported March 14 that nearly 600 jobs were to be cut from the Cloverbottom and Greene Valley developmental facilities for the mentally disabled. The 1,200 job eliminations come atop the cutting of 4,000 other state jobs in the past four years.

Other budget cuts include some \$40 million from TennCare, the joint state- and federally funded Medicaid program for the poor. The cuts would reduce reimbursements for emergency room visits, cesarean section deliveries, and restrict prescription drug coverage. The Governor's Office on Children's Care Coordination, which provides care to mothers and infants, is slated to be eliminated, and the Department of Children's Services would see at least seven community facilities closed due to a \$2.8 million budget reduction.

Higher education is also to be cut by 2 percent, or \$20 million. The reduction is being cited as a justification for tuition hikes of at least 7 percent at state universities and 5 percent at community and technical colleges.



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