

Assault on Louisiana schools escalates

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The public education system in Louisiana continues to deteriorate for the workforce and students alike, as local governments statewide ramp up their attacks on workers' rights and increase the tempo of the charter school takeover.

The news is generally grim statewide. In Monroe, the school board has announced plans to create three charter schools within the district. The board voted 5-1 in favor of the applications by the three charter school operators, with the one dissenting member, board president Verbon Muhammad, who made clear that his only objection was that the three applications were considered one for the purpose of approval.

The *Monroe News-Star* reported that, although state law requires local school boards to have charter proposals first be considered by an independent evaluator, "Superintendent Kathleen Harris told the board that she was told in a call from the state Department of Education on Monday that the board didn't have to follow the law." Tellingly, Harris insisted that a representative of the department's parental options division "told her that other districts had 'not complied with the letter of the law' and approved charters without evaluations and received no negative effects."

Two pieces of legislation passed in April to attack teacher tenure and create a statewide school voucher system have been challenged in the courts by the Louisiana Federation of Teachers. The law governing tenure will make "tenure rights harder for new teachers to secure and ties the protections for all teachers, current and new hires, to student performance," the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* reports.

In spite of its sweeping attacks on working conditions and job security, however, the union has been challenged the legislation on the narrowest of procedural grounds. According to the *Times-Picayune*, "The challenge to the tenure and personnel law hangs

on constitutional requirements that bills, with narrow exceptions, deal with a singular topic and that amendments be related to that subject matter." The paper notes that "some staff attorneys at the Legislature" believe that the judges would "be reluctant to strike down legislation purely on 'dual object' grounds."

Some of the most vicious attacks on teachers have come at the local level. The recently elected school board of Jefferson Parish, which borders the city of New Orleans, voted unanimously in April to endorse a reorganization plan of Superintendent James Meza. The school system has attempted to spin this as an attempt to reduce administrative costs and shift resources towards students. However, the "reorganization" is in fact a plan for shuttering schools and ripping up teachers' rights. Principals will have increased authority in hiring and firing teachers, "underperforming" schools will be closed, and the central office staff will shrink in size, with the exception of several new executive positions.

Meza has stated that his plan is modeled, among other examples, on the "success" of Baltimore City Schools. By this he does not mean academic success—no Baltimore city school even breaks the top 25 in the state of Maryland, according to the most recent *US News and World Report* rankings—but rather success in ramming through budget cuts most effectively. In Baltimore, as in Jefferson Parish, education officials make the surreal claim that they are orienting their budgets more towards students when in fact they are eliminating teacher positions and increasing class sizes.

The consequences of the "reorganization" have been swift. Seven schools were closed at the end of the academic year, 15 school principals were fired for poor test scores, and 500 positions within the school system have been eliminated entirely. The 200 office workers from the central administration and 300 teachers from

seven recently shuttered schools were told to apply for other jobs within the school system. However, this is under conditions where the school system is cutting millions from its annual budget. The central office and school closings are expected to save \$5.6 million and \$5.8 million respectively, while the expected deficit for the 2012-2013 fiscal year could rise to \$30 million.

The school board has since announced plans to freeze teacher pay for the third consecutive year. In addition, with the teachers union's contract expiring at the end of the month, the board voted 5-3 on June 6 to strip teachers of their contract during negotiations rather than continue under the old agreement.

Jefferson Parish delegate to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education James Garvey argued against extending the contract, ominously noting that the job of negotiating a new contract might lie with the superintendent rather than the school board under the new "reforms." The decision was made at a packed-house meeting in front of a crowd composed mainly of teachers.

The unions, led by the Jefferson Federation of Teachers, have registered their pro forma protests, but refuse to take action in defense of teachers' jobs. Even after the large turnout to the school board meeting demonstrated teachers' willingness to fight, the union has not even raised the possibility of strike action. The president of the JFT said only that they would "work harder to make sure to build a new contract in a timely fashion."

In addition to budget cutting, the school system has announced a second round of charter school expansions. At present, the school district "only" administers two charter schools. The state department of education has pledged to hand \$200,000 each year for three years in "start-up money" to new charter schools in Jefferson Parish. Meanwhile, the school board has decided to reconsider a charter school application in the town of Kenner.

Along with the cuts to schools across Louisiana, post-secondary education is also under attack. The latest state budget will slice tens of millions from the budgets of the various public university systems, with the Louisiana State University system projected to be the hardest hit, losing \$10.6 million this year. Next year, however, according to the Associated Press, the University of Louisiana system is slated to lose \$54

million in state funding.

WSWS reporters spoke to residents of New Orleans about the recent developments in education in Louisiana.

Dee, a Bible school teacher, noted, "The money they're cutting right now is money for the future... We can't have a whole bunch of uneducated people in the future. How will our country run?"

"They're trying to hurt the poor and keep them illiterate," said Rachel, who is homeless. "You need an education if you want to go anywhere. You need to know how to count money. You need to be able to read. Without an education, you're living only by the grace of God."

"We need more after-school programs, with lunches for them and stuff to keep them active," she added.

Larry, a levee pump operator, said, "It's especially hard for young people these days. Kids go off to school, and when they get out of college they have \$80,000 to \$90,000 in student loan debt!"



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