California state legislature passes new attack on teachers

Jack Cody, Marc Wells
14 September 2013

Last Friday, California Governor Jerry Brown signed Assembly Bill 449, also known as California Teacher Accountability Bill, marking the latest attack on workers and an intensification of the powers of the state.

Assembly Bill 449 will penalize public school superintendents who fail to report to the state Commission on Teacher Credentialing within 30 days when a teacher is disciplined or fired for misconduct. Reporting the incident to the credentialing board ensures that the fired teacher will not be able to get a job anywhere else.

Those "refusing or willfully neglecting" to report actions against teachers would be considered engaging in "unprofessional conduct" and would face possible misdemeanor charges, including fines of up to $1,000.

Jim Evans, spokesman for Governor Brown, said, "The bill will help keep students safe by requiring all school superintendents and administrators to report teacher misconduct in a timely fashion." Presented as an effort to protect the safety of children, the law in fact aims to expand the powers of the state apparatus while targeting the working class.

AB 449 is part of an ongoing effort to eliminate teachers' protections against termination. The bill enlists superintendents to monitor and report teachers for "misconduct," vague legal language that will ultimately be used to encompass a broad range of charges. Superintendents under the new law will act as the eyes and ears of the state, facing their own severe penalties for failure to report on their subordinates.

The media plays an important role in this process, by drumming up and sensationalizing allegations which are then used to remove teachers.

The bill was filed following a case of lewd acts allegedly committed by 62-year-old Mark Berndt, a Miramonte Elementary teacher of 30 years, in prison waiting for trial, and 50-year-old Martin Springer. While the actions of the teachers are a source of legitimate concern, the case was utilized to launch a media and political campaign of vilification and sex abuse phobia. The result was a slew of bills, including AB 449, whose real aim is to demolish well-established workers' democratic rights and benefits.

Last May, the California Assembly passed AB 375, a similarly reactionary bill (see " California State Assembly passes bill to enable teacher firings ") that speeds up and "streamlines" the process of dismissing teachers. The bill was rejected by the Senate Education Committee last July, then resurrected with the support of the unions and the Democratic Party. As of this week, it has moved to the Senate floor.

Lobbyists and lawyers are even considering a 2014 ballot measure on teacher discipline, which would further encourage a climate of vilification.

While focused on children's safety and "problematic" teachers, the new laws put in place procedures that bypass the due process guarantees that constitute the backbone of modern democracy and that were won by workers through decades of hard fought struggles. They are part of a conscious political and media campaign aimed at shifting responsibility for the underfunded public school system onto the backs of the working class.

Such initiatives pave the way for speedy and unrestrained dismissal of education personnel and, ultimately, the privatization of public education, a trend which has been well established both at a federal as well as state level.

President Obama's Race to the Top (RTT) program aimed at turning "poorly performing" schools into charters or private institutions, or shutting them down

© World Socialist Web Site

altogether.

Obama received the support of the trade unions, which backed the RTT plan as well as the proliferation of charter schools. The administration has overseen the destruction of 300,000 state and local education jobs and the closure of hundreds of schools across the country.

California Governor Jerry Brown also counted on the unions as he went after the public education system in California. Some $18 billion of K-12 cuts later, he tried, with the support of the unions, to sell Proposition 30 as a way to restore public education in the state. However, the measure did not restore school budgets and any increase in funding for education was tied primarily to regressive taxes, weighing disproportionately on workers.

The teacher unions have also strongly backed AB 449. Last year, in the aftermath of the Miramonte developments, the United Teachers of Los Angeles issued a perfunctory statement complaining that lawmakers had thrown teachers “under the bus.”

In supporting AB 449, however, the union revealed its true position. Warren Fletcher, president of UTLA, declared that the bill would “ensure district superintendents are held accountable.”

In order to create an illusion of opposition to anti-workers policies and concern for students’ safety, the union is trying to present the current bill as a strike against incumbent LAUSD Superintendent John Deasy, deservedly hated by teachers for his implementation of reactionary measures, but blamed by UTLA for failing to report teachers to the authorities. However, by supporting the latest bill, UTLA in fact supports such policies, regardless of who occupies that post.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site