

Boone County, West Virginia school board imposes cuts to public education

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The school board for the southern West Virginia county of Boone voted unanimously last week to impose deep cuts to its education system. The state-mandated cuts to school services and employee pay and benefits had been twice rejected by the board over the preceding weeks.

Over the past three weeks, the West Virginia Board of Education (BOE) has increased its threats against the Boone County school board after it unanimously rejected, in front of cheering audiences on June 30 and again of July 7, directives from West Virginia schools superintendent Michael Martirano to immediately slash its budget and gut the pay and benefits for school employees and retirees.

The intimidation culminated in a vote by the BOE on July 14 approving a state takeover of the county school system if a “fiscally sufficient” budget was not submitted by July 18.

The school board responded by unanimously passing a new austerity budget on July 18 and subsequently approved by the BOE which includes salary pay cuts of between \$3,650 to \$4,000 for teachers, administrators, service workers, bus drivers, and custodians, in addition to pay cuts for employees overseeing extracurricular activities such as athletics and academic contests. The new budget also eliminates employer-paid dental and vision coverage for both current employees and retirees.

The new cuts come on the heels of the school board’s vote during the 2015-16 school year to close three of the county’s 10 elementary schools and eliminate 80 positions.

Boone school board members have seized on the threatened state takeover to justify their acquiescence to the BOE’s demands while promoting the illusion that if they maintain local control of the district they will be in a position to restore the cuts in the future.

For their part, the unions covering the district’s teachers and employees have not opposed the cuts in principle, but

have argued that the county should be given more time to consider what cuts should be made and where. Instead of mobilizing their members and appealing to the county’s coal miners and other workers to come to the defense of public education as a social right, the unions are seeking to divert the anger and frustration of workers into the safe channels of the courts.

The American Federation of Teachers has argued that the state’s legal arguments regarding the cuts are flawed and the West Virginia Education Association has indicated that it will take legal action once its members become affected by the cuts and can become plaintiffs in a legal suit.

The assault on education in Boone County takes place amidst an historic decline of coal mining throughout southern West Virginia and Central Appalachia. The region’s coal industry is being hammered by a collapse in commodity prices driven by the stagnation and slump in the global economy and the resulting slowdown in emerging markets, particularly China. On the domestic front, coal continues to lose ground to cheap and abundant natural gas for electricity generation.

According to the West Virginia Office of Miners’ Health, Safety, and Training, coal production in Boone has plunged from nearly 21 million tons in 2011 to just over 7 million last year. This has been accompanied by the shuttering of scores of mines and the loss of more than 3,169 coal mining jobs in the county between the fourth quarter of 2011 and the close of 2015, a number which has since been overtaken by the continued hemorrhaging of jobs in coal mining and related industries in the first half of 2016.

With the US coal industry losing 94 percent of its market value over the past five years, scores of energy companies, including the major coal companies of Peabody Energy, Arch Coal, Alpha Natural Resources, and Patriot Coal, have sought the protection of the

bankruptcy courts to restructure, slash wages and benefits, attack working conditions, and shift the weight of the industry's collapse onto the backs of workers.

The assault on Boone County schools is only the beginning of what is in store for the historically impoverished region as the coal industry contracts. Having extracted untold wealth through the back-breaking labor of generations of coal miners, at the risk of life, limb, and black lung disease, the ruling elite now intends to abandon the area with its deteriorated infrastructure, polluted streams, and leveled mountains.

Once the heart of coal production in West Virginia, a stronghold of the United Mine Workers of America, and the historic scene of militant struggles by coal miners, Boone County is now being forced to accept a new normal of poverty, unemployment, and social retrogression as the profits from coal extraction dry up. This is the significance of the insistence by the BOE that Boone reduce pay for its teachers – currently the second-highest in the state – to that which existed in 1984 and which corresponds today to the state minimum.

Counties like Boone, whose budgets rely heavily on the tax revenue derived from coal mining operations, have been devastated by the coal industry's collapse. An expected \$2.4 million contraction of tax revenues in fiscal year 2015-16 turned out to be \$9.3 million, representing an unexpected drop in the county's operating budget of nearly 17 percent. This has been compounded by declining enrollment in the county's school district as families are forced to relocate in search of employment.

Since the end of fiscal year 2011-12, the school district has drained a reserve fund of about \$8.5 million, ending the most recent 2015-16 school year with a \$4.6 million deficit, the largest of any county school district in West Virginia. It was only able to pay teachers their summer checks this year after the state legislature approved an emergency infusion of \$2.2 million during a special session in June.

According to the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, Boone schools superintendent Jeff Huffman claimed at the July 18 meeting that the school system had received a West Virginia American Water shutoff notice for its central office, as well as threats of service cuts from the school district's food vendor for unpaid bills. He also said the district was having issues buying fuel for its school buses.

Boone County's budget has also been undermined by a series of budget cuts at the state level. Over the past three years, Democratic Governor Earl Ray Tomblin has slashed the state budget by 20 percent and signed

legislation earlier this year eliminating an excess severance tax on coal and natural gas, costing the state about \$110 million annually. Since taking office in 2010, Tomblin has cut the state's corporate net income tax rate from 8.5 to 6.5 percent and completely eliminated the Business Franchise Tax at the start of 2015.

The assault on public education in West Virginia is not limited to Boone County. On the same day the Boone school board passed its new budget, the Barbour County school board voted unanimously to close two of its elementary schools – Mount Vernon Elementary and Volga-Century Elementary – at the end of the upcoming school year. Students will be bused nine miles away to Philippi Elementary.

Enrollment at Mount Vernon has dropped from 115 to 57 and at Volga-Century from 109 to 37 over the past decade, which county officials blame on the closure of coal mines in the area. The two schools were built in the late 1970s and are in need of major repairs and upgrades which the school district claims to have no money for.

County officials in Nicolas and Kanawha counties have also recently announced that five schools damaged by the June floods have sustained too much damage to reopen in time for the start of classes in August. Displaced students at Summersville Middle, Richwood Middle, and Richwood High in Nicolas and Herbert Hoover High and Clendenin Elementary in Kanawha will be forced to attend classes at other schools and in portable classrooms. School officials in both counties express doubts that any of the five schools will reopen.



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