

Unions seek to block struggle against education cuts in Boone County, West Virginia

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Unions representing teachers and staff in Boone County, West Virginia have filed two lawsuits against last month's deep budget cuts to the county's public school system. The American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT), West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), and the AFL-CIO allege that the July 18 vote by the Boone County school board to slash its budget and impose pay and benefit cuts on its members violated the due-process rights of school employees.

In front of large, cheering crowds of teachers, school staff, and parents on June 30 and July 7, the Boone County school board had unanimously rejected demands from the West Virginia Board of Education (WVBOE) that it immediately slash its school budget. On July 14, the WVBOE responded by approving a state takeover of the county school system if a balanced budget was not submitted by July 18.

Armed with the threat of the state takeover, the Boone County school board justified its capitulation and dutifully imposed the directives of the WVBOE, slashing its budget by some \$6 million. The new school budget included salary cuts of between \$3,650 to \$4,000 for teachers, administrators, service workers, bus drivers, and custodians; additional cuts to supplemental pay for employees overseeing extracurricular activities such as athletics and academic contests; and the elimination of 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. Now, an additional 40 teachers and staff have resigned in response to the latest cuts leaving the school district woefully understaffed for the start of classes on August 15.

The crisis in Boone County comes amidst a collapse in global commodity prices and the stagnation of the world economy, which has reverberated throughout the US coal industry and in Central Appalachia in particular. Over the

past five years, the US coal industry has lost 94 percent of its market value, leading to scores of mine closures, thousands of layoffs, and sending dozens of coal companies into bankruptcy.

Once the heart of coal production in West Virginia, Boone County has become the epicenter of this crisis. Coal production has plunged in the county from nearly 21 million tons in 2011 to just over 7 million last year, and the county has lost more coal mining jobs than any other in the country. According to an analysis by SNL Energy, in the four years between the fourth quarter of 2011 and the close of 2015, the county has lost 3,169 coal-mining jobs.

The collapse of the coal industry in Central Appalachia has devastated the county's budget, which is heavily dependent upon the various taxes reaped from coal production. While the Boone County assessor had estimated a \$2.4 million decline in tax revenues for the 2015-16 fiscal year, the shortfall turned out to be closer to \$9.3 million, representing a nearly 17 percent drop in the county's operating budget. The county school district was only able to pay its teachers their summer checks due to an emergency infusion of \$2.2 million by the state legislature enacted at a special session in June.

Now that the untold wealth extracted through the backbreaking labor of generations of coal miners is drying up, social tensions are building. As workers seek to maintain their standard of living and social rights won through bitter struggles, the ruling class aims to claw these concessions back and place the full burden of the crisis on their backs.

This was summed up in the directives from West Virginia schools superintendent Michael Martirano who demanded among other cuts that Boone County reduce pay for its teachers--then the second-highest in the state--to levels that existed in 1984, which are equivalent to the current state minimum.

Opposing any real fight against the coal giants and the Democratic Party, which has long dominated state politics,

the teachers unions and the AFL-CIO are instead encouraging illusions that public education and the rights of school employees can be defended through appeals to the courts. The lawsuits, moreover, are primarily aimed at protecting the income and institutional interests of union apparatus.

One complaint challenges the constitutionality of sections of the state code, which allow boards of education to change the terms of a contract, relating to duration and compensation, without holding a hearing. The unions also filed a grievance on behalf of local AFT president Carrena Rouse alleging improper and unlawful removal of her salary and benefits.

It is essential to note that the unions are not in fact opposing the budget cuts in principle; they are merely opposing how they have been carried out. This is not an unimportant distinction. While the teachers, school staff, and parents who packed the school board meetings were concerned with the impact the cuts would have on public education, the lawsuits filed by the unions are being motivated by narrow self interests.

The salaries and perks enjoyed by the union executives are derived from the dues paid by their members, their close connections with the state Democratic Party, and the “seats at the table” where they negotiate away the living standards and rights of the school employees they claim to represent. This relationship is threatened if the unions are bypassed and contract changes are imposed by fiat without their collaboration. This is what ultimately lies behind all the talk from the unions about everyone coming to the table and working out a deal.

“What I’m hoping is we can come up with a solution that people can all live with,” WVEA President Dale Lee told the West Virginia *MetroNews*. “The only way we’re going to do that I guess is either through legal action or people coming to the table with common sense and figuring it all out.”

“There’s yet to be a meeting where all of the stakeholders go to the table and say ‘Here’s what we have. Here’s the pot of money that needs to be divided. Now let’s come up with ideas on how to do this,’ that hasn’t happened,” Lee complained.

The American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, the parent unions of the state affiliates involved the lawsuits, were among the first unions to endorse Obama in 2008 and 2012 and most recently Hillary Clinton. Far from opposing the corporate-driven “school reform” agenda of the Democrats—scapegoating teachers, merit pay, closing public schools and opening charters—the unions have only insisted that the politicians use the services of the unions to impose these anti-teacher

and anti-public education policies.

If teachers wish to know how their union will perform in response to the assault being waged against public education, they need look no further than the United Mine Workers. As the coal industry has collapsed about it, the UMW has done nothing to mobilize coal miners against mine closures and layoffs. Rather, the UMW has directed its energy at similar legal interventions at bankrupt coal companies, while simultaneously negotiating concessions contracts.

The courts are not neutral bodies. Like the Democrats and Republicans they serve the most powerful corporate and financial interests.

The Socialist Equality Party is running Naomi Spencer for the West Virginia House of Delegates in District 16 to mobilize the working class as an independent political force against both big business parties.

We urge Boone County educators to elect rank-and-file committees consisting of teachers, parents, service personnel, bus drivers, and custodians to defend the right to public education. These committees should make a broad appeal throughout the region not only for support from other teachers and students, but from coal miners and oil, auto, steel, telecom, health care, railroad and other workers.

A real struggle must start from the premise that public education is an inalienable social right. It would reject the claims that there is “no money” to provide children a quality education while also guaranteeing teachers and school staff a secure job with decent pay and benefits commensurate with the importance of their work. To pay for this, the SEP is calling for the multi-billion dollar energy conglomerates to be put under the collective ownership and democratic control of working people.



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