

Residents speak on the impact of education cuts in Boone County, West Virginia

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A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team visited Boone County, West Virginia to speak to residents about the impact of recent cuts to public education imposed on the eve of the new school year.

After twice rejecting directives from the West Virginia Board of Education to slash its budget, the Boone County school board voted on July 18 to cut salaries for teachers, administrators, and support workers by \$3,650 to \$4,000 and eliminate employer-paid dental and vision coverage for both current employees and retirees.

The WSWS reporters handed out a statement opposing the cuts and calling on teachers to break with their unions which have been complicit in the decades-long assault on public education. It encouraged teachers to form independent rank-and-file committees to organize opposition to the cuts and issue a broad appeal for support to other sections of the working class—in particular the region’s coal miners—that are likewise under assault.

In explaining the need to break politically with the Democratic and Republican parties, which have rivaled one another in attacking public education over the past decades, the WSWS reporters explained that only the working class, organized and fighting for a socialist program, could guarantee the right to a decent public education. Election materials for Socialist Equality Party presidential and vice presidential candidates Jerry White and Niles Niemuth, as well as West Virginia District 16 House of Delegates’ candidate Naomi Spencer, were distributed to residents.

In the county seat of Madison, the WSWS spoke with Theresa, the parent of a Scott High School 11th grader. Her son plays baseball and soccer, and was enrolled in AP (advanced placement) classes. Theresa explained that these areas were all being impacted by teacher

layoffs and the elimination of funding for basic programs.

“Due to the budget cuts, we have no classes for advanced students,” she said. “They tell us now they don’t have funding for our children. That’s not fair to our kids. It’s going to leave our kids behind.”

“All the kids here need an education. They’re cutting and cutting and putting teachers in positions that they are not qualified to teach. For example, our Spanish teacher, they got rid of her, and are putting in a regular (English) teacher. How is that going to help our kids? They’re getting ready for college and they don’t have the proper teachers.”

The latest round of cuts come on top of the school board’s vote earlier this year to close three of the county’s 10 elementary schools and eliminate 80 positions. Nearly 40 additional teachers resigned in the wake of the salary and benefit cuts announced in July, leaving the county school system woefully understaffed for the new school year.

“School starts Monday and they don’t know anybody’s schedule,” added another parent listening to Theresa. “We went to middle school orientation last night and don’t even have a home room. They don’t have teachers, they have subs there. They had us just stand in the halls and walk around, because they don’t know who kids’ teachers will be.”

When asked what young people had to do for recreation or entertainment in Boone County, Theresa replied, “Drugs and drinking. We have nothing. Our mine industry is gone, and now the schools are being cut.”

When WSWS reporters proposed organizing to oppose the cuts Theresa responded that many of the teachers were “scared to stand up to them. Our system is so crooked in Boone County it’s not funny, and

teachers don't want to say anything for fear of losing their jobs. Some of the parents are too, because they're afraid it will come back on their students."

"If you were allowed to go into our schools, you would see that they are so old. They smell. They've not been updated—it's really nasty. Kids lunches are nasty," she said. "And now, they're taking our buses away. Parents will have to drive kids to their games." Parents pointed out that the school required parents to pay \$100 an hour to use the sports field lights. (See: "Resident of West Virginia coal mining community speaks on economic crisis")

"It's a bad situation and it's only going to get worse," she commented. "We can't get new [sports] uniforms this year. What we are getting is from parents pooling their money to buy it."

In the small town of Hewett, West Virginia, the WSWs team spoke to Letha Dent. The 68-year-old is a retired piano teacher and former school board member who lives across the road from Jeffrey-Spencer Elementary, one of the three schools voted closed in February. Letha invited the reporting team into her home to speak.

"I'm very upset at the school system," she said. "It's going to be to the limit of each classroom at Ramage, I'm sure," she said referring to nearby Ramage Elementary where the children from Jeffrey-Spencer will start the new school year. "Over here we had preschool, Kindergarten, first through fifth, and then a special needs class. I was talking to one teacher at Ramage and she said all she would need is one more desk and she would be at the max." Class sizes are expected to increase to 28 students, compared to a student-teacher ratio of 13:1 at Jeffrey-Spencer.

Like many in the area, Letha's family history is bound up with the coal industry. "My dad worked in the coal mines, my father-in-law did too. My husband [Carlos Dent] was killed in 1980, when there were five men killed in an explosion at Pond Fork. And he was one of them," she explained. "My kids were 12, 11, and my youngest one was 5. They all three went to school over here. My mother taught here."

"It breaks my heart to think that they're closing this school, and putting students on a bus and sending them to Ramage. And not that they don't have good teachers here, but it's the thought that they're taking them out of a school they're used to," she said.

"I know kids can make friends easy, but there's not room to park, and so on. If they have a function, for example, they said they'll have to divide it up into two sections so parents can come and park." She stated that Ramage was several decades older than the building being shuttered, and its facilities were out-of-date in many respects.

Letha noted the changes to the county schools over the years, including the closure of a grade school and the reopening of the building as the Donald R. Kuhn Juvenile Center, a detention facility for youth.

"I don't know what they will do with the building," she said of Jeffrey-Spencer Elementary. Letha and her family had watched crews pulling material from it over the summer, and heard that the school district planned to tear down another school closed this year, Wharton Elementary.

"They've gutted it," she said. "They had seven or eight trucks over here at one time. They took the light fixtures off, the air conditioning units off the inside. They've taken all the kitchen things. They've taken bookcases, children's seats." The material was being stored in the Madison Kindergarten Academy building, displacing those classes into the elementary school.

Letha reported that she had attended a school board meeting and asked about the fate of the building. "They're wanting to sell it," she explained, "but they're not going to get anything out of it. If no one comes through to buy it, they said they're going to put it up for auction at the courthouse steps."



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