

Boone County, West Virginia students lack textbooks

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8 October 2016

Following the imposition of deep cuts to public education, many students in Boone County, West Virginia lack basic science textbooks. So far this year only sixth, seventh and eighth graders have personal science texts or access to classroom sets, according to a report by the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*.

The county school system disposed of the old science textbooks at the close of last school year with the intention of purchasing new ones over the summer months. The plan was motivated in part by the age of the texts themselves—over a decade old—as well as recent changes to the state’s science education standards.

Prior to the purchase of the new texts, however, the West Virginia Board of Education (BOE) intervened and directed the county to slash its school budget, leading to an 18-day standoff in which the Boone County school board voted twice to reject the cuts. The school board eventually used the BOE’s threat of a state takeover of the county school system as cover to impose the mandated cuts.

The revised budget unanimously passed by the county school board on July 18 included salary cuts of between \$3,650 and \$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. It also eliminated employer-paid dental and vision coverage for both current employees and retirees.

The budget also included a \$169,000 savings realized by delaying the purchase of new textbooks, despite the fact that the old books had already been discarded. The BOE approved this deduction in the Boone budget and subsequently issued Boone schools a waiver from purchasing texts that complied with the updated science standards.

According to Boone Assistant Superintendent Lisa Beck, the county has released an additional \$7 per student

per school this year to science departments to help offset the lack of new books.

Boone teachers and students are bearing the brunt of the fiscal crisis wracking the county and the coalfields of southern West Virginia. The coal industry of Central Appalachia has been hammered by the collapse of commodity prices driven by the stagnation of the global economy and slowdown in emerging markets, particularly China. Domestically, coal continues to lose ground to cheap and abundant natural gas for electricity generation.

According to the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at West Virginia University, the state has lost 16,000 jobs in the energy sector since 2012 while coal production in the state is less than half of what it was in 2010.

“Those job losses, those output losses, have been heavily concentrated in southern West Virginia and especially in six counties,” economist Dr. John Deskins told a hearing of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in August. “We have six counties that have lost between 25 percent and 33 percent of their jobs just over the last few years.”

Deskins explained that six southern West Virginia counties—Boone, McDowell, Wyoming, Mingo, Clay, and Logan—were currently experiencing “great depression” conditions due to the enormous losses.

In Boone County, once the heart of coal production in West Virginia, output has fallen from nearly 21 million tons in 2011 to just over 7 million last year. As a result, scores of mines have been closed and more than 3,169 coal mining jobs wiped out in the county. This, in turn, has devastated the county’s budget, which relies heavily on the tax revenue derived from coal mining operations.

Since the end of fiscal year 2011-12, the county school system 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 system 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.

In addition to the deep cuts imposed in the new budget this summer, Boone County closed three of its 10 elementary schools and eliminated 80 positions at the close of last school year.

At the state level, more cuts are expected with West Virginia Revenue Secretary Bob Kiss announcing last week that tax collections have come up \$81.2 million short over the past three months. Kiss warned that “remedial action” would be needed to avoid another budget deficit.

Democratic Governor Earl Ray Tomblin, who will leave office next year due to reaching his term limit, has vowed to leave the next governor a balanced budget. Over the past three years, Tomblin has slashed the state budget by 20 percent and eliminated an excess severance tax on coal and natural gas. Since taking office in 2010, Tomblin has also 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 teachers’ unions—tied politically to the Democratic Party and committed to the capitalist system—have done nothing to mobilize against the assault being waged against public education. In response to the deep budget cuts imposed in Boone, the West Virginia chapters of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association directed the anger of teachers and school staff away from a struggle in defense of public education and into the safe channels of the courts.

The impotence of the bogus lawsuits and grievances filed by the unions in the wake of the cuts to Boone teachers’ pay and benefits was exposed in a ruling by the West Virginia Supreme Court last month against teachers from Calhoun County. Calhoun schools had the largest budget deficit in West Virginia before being overtaken by Boone last year.

Similar to the struggle over the Boone budget this past summer, the BOE ordered the Calhoun County school board on June 30, 2014—the day before the start of the new fiscal year—to cut its budget by \$100,000 by reducing the number of employment days and slashing teachers’ supplemental pay by \$600.

Calhoun teachers filed suits against the county school system relying, on the same legal argument forming the basis of the Boone lawsuits, that state law requires teachers be notified prior to March 1 for changes to their

employment contract for the upcoming school year.

While the Calhoun teachers had previously won the return of their supplemental pay last year, the state supreme court ruled in relation to the other contractual changes that state law does not limit “the State Board of Education’s authority to act only in situations where the appropriate notice and hearing requirements for BOE employees are satisfied under other statutory provisions.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* argued during the struggle over the Boone schools budget cuts, “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.”

The realization of this perspective requires a struggle against the capitalist system that subordinates the wellbeing of teachers and students to the profit interests of the banks and corporations and is daily demonstrating its inability to provide even the most basic social needs to the working population.

This requires a political and organizational break with the Democratic Party and the trade unions. Teachers, school staff and parents should form rank-and-file committees to defend the right to public education through the mobilization not only of educational workers throughout the state, but workers in coal, oil, auto, steel, telecom, health care and transportation facing similar attacks on their living standards.

We urge teachers and parents who support this perspective to attend the public meeting today at noon at the Hamlin Public Library in nearby Lincoln County. Socialist Equality Party candidate for the District 16 West Virginia House of Delegates, Naomi Spencer, will be speaking about the 2016 elections, the conditions faced by the region’s workers, and the socialist response.



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