

As teachers face new battles against Trump

# Lessons of the fight against Obama’s “school reform”—Part 1

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The new year will see a growth of the class struggle throughout the world and within the US, as the corporate and financial elites demand more austerity from the working class even as they wallow in levels of personal wealth not seen since the Gilded Age.

After overseeing the largest tax cut for the rich in US history, the Trump administration is gearing up to destroy longstanding social benefits, including Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. It will make America, already the most unequal advanced economy in the world, far more unequal.

Trump’s tax legislation will have massive implications for public education. By capping state and local tax deductions for individuals, it will likely result in the loss of up to a quarter of a million public education jobs, as municipalities—which provide 90 percent of school funding—are unable to raise revenues. Governors, mayors and school district officials from both parties will announce that there is no money left to maintain quality schools, let alone decent salaries, classroom conditions and pensions.

Federally-funded education programs, including Title I, Special Education and Head Start, which provide benefits to poor or disadvantaged students, will be targeted to pay for the handouts to the wealthy and giant corporations.

On the other hand, the Trump measure provides, for the first time, the ability for wealthy families to invest in tax-free plans for private K-12 schooling, and continues the lucrative policy allowing charter schools to utilize tax-free Private Activity Bonds. These changes significantly shift the education tax structure in line with the privatization policies advocated by Trump’s education secretary Betsy DeVos.

A new stage of struggle is on the horizon for teachers, working-class parents and students. Past experience,

however, demonstrates that spontaneous expressions of opposition are not enough. Educators need a new political strategy and organizations controlled by rank-and-file teachers and school employees themselves, to mobilize the working class to defend the right to high quality public education for all.

The period from 2007 to 2016 saw the fewest major work stoppages in the US of any decade since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began recording them in 1947. This was not the result of any complacency among workers, let alone satisfaction with the historic transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top that occurred during the Obama years.

On the contrary, it was the outcome of the deliberate policy of the AFL-CIO and other unions, which guaranteed the Obama administration “labor peace” in the aftermath of 2008 financial crash, giving the Democratic president a free hand to bail out the Wall Street banks, starve the states and school districts of funding, and restructure economic and social relations at the expense of the working class.

In order to maintain the political straitjacket of the Democratic Party over the working class and prevent any challenge from below to the financial oligarchy, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) worked overtime to smother the opposition of teachers—above all in the suppression of the powerful strikes and mass protests that exploded in Wisconsin in 2011, Chicago in 2012 and Detroit in 2015-16.

Each of these struggles expressed, in their own way, the determination of teachers to find an independent road of struggle. Their bold actions galvanized popular support among high school students, parents and broader sections of the working class and of middle-class people. To

prepare the next stage of struggle, it is necessary to draw the critical political lessons from these experiences.

## Lessons of Wisconsin

The struggle of Wisconsin teachers and public-sector workers nearly seven years ago was among the most important class battles in the US in recent years. On February 14, 2011, Republican Governor Scott Walker introduced Act 10, also known as the Wisconsin Budget Repair Bill, into the state legislature, providing for sweeping cuts to public sector workers' pensions and health care benefits, and outlawing strikes and collective bargaining. This included a massive \$1.25 billion in cuts to school aid and local government.

The response by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) and other unions was to acquiesce to Walker's budget-cutting demands. At the same time, the union officials organized token protests aimed solely at defending "collective bargaining."

While workers interpreted this to mean protecting their right to fight for improved wages and conditions, the union bureaucracy had something very different in mind. As mass protests were beginning, WEAC President Mary Bell said, "This is not about protecting our pay and our benefits. It is about protecting our right to collectively bargain." For the union apparatus "collective bargaining" means retaining their dues income and state-sanctioned "seat at the table," where they negotiate away workers' hard-earned wages and benefits.

Independently of the unions, high school students walked out of their classrooms to defend their teachers, who then followed with a campaign of sickouts. In a matter of days, the largest working class movement in the US since the 1980s erupted, with militant workers and young people occupying the state capitol in Madison, defying Walker's threats to call out the National Guard, and teachers rejecting back-to-work orders by WEAC. Support was building for a general strike.

The unions were thoroughly opposed to a general strike, which would quickly develop into a political clash not just with Walker but with the Democratic governors in Illinois, California, New York and other states, and with the Obama administration itself. The Democrats were

carrying out similar austerity measures, albeit with the collusion of the unions. Wisconsin Democrats chastised Walker, boasting that his Democratic predecessor, Governor Jim Doyle, had imposed the deepest austerity cuts in state history, but had accomplished this without popular resistance, precisely because he worked with the unions.

The unions quickly shut down the mass movement and peddled the lie that the only means of opposing Walker was to support recall campaigns to replace the Republican governor and state senators with Democrats. In 2012, Walker defeated the Democratic challenger, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, a shill for big business in the mold of Hillary Clinton.

By demobilizing the working class, the unions paved the way for Walker to implement his reactionary program. Before Act 10 came into effect, the unions moved quickly to impose multi-year concession contracts on teachers and other state workers in a bid to maintain their position as bargaining agents.

For teachers, this has meant:

- 40 percent of school districts have moved to performance-based pay.
- Teachers are considered "free agents" and are bargained for competitively by various districts, creating chaos and "churn" of teachers, with 75 percent of school districts saying they have lost teachers because a competitor offered a better salary or benefits.
- Two-thirds of districts have cut or ended benefits for retirees.
- Class sizes have been increased and the workday has been lengthened.
- Sixty percent of districts surveyed said teachers' average annual salary growth had either slowed (50%), stopped (8%) or reversed (3%).
- The divide between better off and poorer districts has been exacerbated. Rural schools and low-income schools are routinely losing teachers and are more likely to use inexperienced teachers or those with "emergency" credentials.

*To be continued*



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