

# Arizona teachers escalate their fight for education funding

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15 March 2018

Arizona educators have been galvanized by the growth of teachers' struggles, with increasing demands for a statewide strike modeled after West Virginia. Hundreds continued their demonstrations at the state capitol building in Phoenix yesterday, as state legislators voted on increased tax credits for private schools, a measure which, should it pass, will further deplete the bankrupted public school system.

Arizona slashed \$1.5 billion from K-12 education during the 2008 recession, reducing per-student funding by 36.6 percent. In 2016, Proposition 123 restored only 18 percent of those cuts, leaving a net shortfall for education at over \$1 billion. The measure, in response to a lawsuit over the state's failure to adequately fund schools, took monies not from big business, but from the state land trust.

Per-student spending now stands at \$4,157, one of the lowest levels nationally, in one of the economically hardest-hit states in the US. A report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation last year shows that Arizona children ranked near the bottom of the nation in overall wellbeing. The survey measured the percentages of kids living in poverty, access to health care and early-childhood education and other indices. The state has 24 percent of children living in high poverty areas and was 46th in the rate of children ages 3 and 4 enrolled in preschool.

On Monday, March 11 about 300 teachers protested outside the radio station KTAR in Phoenix as Republican Governor Doug Ducey spoke inside. Ducey's administration has promoted school vouchers and refused to increase teacher salaries more than a derisory 1 percent. His response to the mounting protests has been to spend more than \$1 million on TV ads to lie about his record on public education.

The planned "Day of Action for Education" on March 28 at the state capitol and associated protests in northern Arizona and Tucson are expected to draw thousands. The

demonstration has been organized by Save Our Schools Arizona (SOSA), originally an anti-school voucher group; Arizona Educators United, a Facebook group of 30,000 members, begun March 4; the Arizona Parent Teacher Association, as well as other teacher Facebook groups.

Dustin, a teacher in Phoenix, said, "Our main issue is class sizes. We have classes exceeding 27 and 28 for first graders. You cannot get anything done with a class that size. Little kids need help. Also, the expenditures on kids needs to go up. I believe we are ranked 48th in the country. The governor promised millions of dollars to education and we got 1 percent a year. It would take a 20 percent raise to put Arizona in the middle of the pack of states.

"I've worked as a teacher for 20 years. I have a Master's degree and doctoral hours and make \$46,000 a year. That might sound okay until you realize that I have to pay \$1,000 a month for health care out of that income."

Britne Hart posted on Arizona Educators United: "[I] can't afford to go to a dentist—too expensive, barely can afford groceries, rent takes most of my check. It's so frustrating to know that I have a Masters, and I still live paycheck to paycheck. Been teaching 5 years and am ready to quit!! I can't sustain the cost of living."

The median pay for Arizona elementary teachers was \$42,474 as of 2016, ranking 50th nationally, according to the Arizona State University Morrison Institute for Public Policy. The state has about 60,000 active classroom teachers, triple the size of West Virginia's teacher population.

Another educator, Dave Jasperson, shared on social media, "When I came here three years ago from Texas I took a \$17,000 pay cut. I refigured my loss this year, as today it would be \$27,000. Between teaching, planning and getting ready for class, I figure I put in 50 hours a week. I also drive for Lyft about 60 hours a week."

Additionally, since 2009, ongoing cuts to school capital

funding have totaled more than \$2 billion. An *Arizona Republic* investigation found nearly 30 percent of the state's school buses failed mandatory safety inspection for major defects in 2015. Schools have been shut down as structural problems in buildings have forced emergency repairs in the middle of the school year. Schools are also diverting dollars normally used for operations, including teacher pay, to help shore up problematic buildings, buses or essential technology and supplies, due to chronic capital underfunding.

Meanwhile, private school tax credits have dramatically expanded, from \$61 million in 2008 to \$253 million in 2018 and growing. The credits direct public tax monies to private and religious schools. Arizona's scheme, similar to operations in Florida and Pennsylvania, allows well-heeled residents to donate to a "voucher-granting nonprofit" and receive a dollar-for-dollar credit on their state taxes. The voucher is then used for tuition at private schools.

The response of the unions to the growing outrage of Arizona educators has been, predictably, to dampen down expectations, seek to assert control over the movement and line up with Democratic Party politicians. As the WSWS reported earlier, AEA president Joe Thomas has been regularly consulting with Dale Lee, the president of the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), who played the leading role in betraying the nine-day strike. According to NBC News, "With Lee's encouragement, Thomas and his members adopted 'small symbolic steps': having teachers wear red, planning walk-ins and walkouts—all while they mull whether to strike."

Dustin, who organized his own teachers' Facebook page, said, "The 'red' movement was started by teachers, but I feel like the color is now tainted. I used to live in Ohio, a huge union state, and I know how they [the unions] contain things. The union, the AEA, last week tried to hijack the teachers' movement to put forward a Democratic candidate for governor, using our rally to announce his campaign. I think this movement must be apolitical. The AEA took 'red' away from us." He emphasized, "NEA/AEA has failed us."

While the AEA is promoting the Democrats as the supposed opposition to the Republican governor's assault on public education, the last Democratic governor, Janet Napolitano (2003-2009), slashed \$100 million from Arizona state universities and another \$40 million from the state's community colleges.

Dustin explained the enormous difficulties facing teachers in the state. "You learn to bounce around

between districts to get higher pay. We have three great universities in our state producing great professionals. But 75 percent of students leave the state to go to other jobs. Of the 25 percent who stay, I bet 20 percent go into other fields. Then the districts also have shortages. Say a district has three schools, it will probably lose about 30 teachers a year—and that is year after year. Sometimes we have young people who come in from other states to teach here. Usually between 1-3 years, and then they are gone.

"People are disillusioned with education and the health problems incurred because of stress in their field. I've been in the state 12 years and every district has been Title I [economically disadvantaged]. There are many reservation schools, which are poor, and there are many undocumented immigrants here. A lot of families don't speak English and this is why there are high levels of poverty. There is no reason for there to be homelessness or hunger anywhere. There is so much wealth here.

"The unions try to put a front on that they are working for us, but they are sitting down with the 1 percent. I've always had a problem with that. I supported them only to support my fellow teachers as part of the organization. The unions have lost their usefulness.

"Here in Arizona, the unions are really money-sucking; they don't provide anything. I care about the people I work for. For so long I put everybody else's kids in front of myself and my kids. Nothing has improved. It's time to make a change. We are riding the wave of West Virginia, although it may be more of an uphill fight here. It's really the wild, wild West."

The real lesson of the West Virginia revolt was that it revealed the enormous chasm between educators and the unions, and raises the need for teachers and school employees to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the AFT and NEA and their state affiliates, to mobilize the broadest support in the working class to oppose the bipartisan attack on public education.



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