

# Kentucky and Arizona teachers rally to defend public education

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Thousands of teachers marched at their state capitols on Wednesday in Kentucky and Arizona, demanding funding for public education, teacher pensions, health care, and in opposition to the privatization of education.

In Kentucky, despite the cold and snow, around a thousand educators rallied, as at least a dozen school superintendents shut schools for the day, allowing teachers to participate in the demonstration without penalty.

In Arizona, a single teacher in the Pendergast elementary school district triggered a shutdown of nine schools by organizing a “sickout” so the teachers could head for a demonstration in Phoenix, which drew a crowd of hundreds. Kayla Wilson, a 5th grade teacher at Pendergast Elementary with three years on the job, told the *Arizona Capitol Times* that she makes about \$35,000 a year and owes more than \$40,000 in student loans.

At the rally in Frankfort, Kentucky, teachers carried handmade placards reading, “Fighting for the future of our kids,” “Our money, our pension, just Vote No,” “Kentucky Fried Us,” “You’ve stirred up a hornet’s nest,” “We can’t put students first if they put teachers last,” and “I don’t have Social Security or a hedge fund,” among others.

Rally participants were well aware that behind the attack on teacher pensions is an attack on public education as a whole, and that the state government is moving rapidly to privatize education by defunding public education and discouraging teacher recruitment.

Republican Governor Matt Bevin, a former hedge fund manager, is pressing for the passage of Senate Bill 1, which slashes retired teachers’ cost-of-living allowance by 33 percent. The budget currently under discussion in the state Senate includes millions of dollars in cuts to public education programs, but

strengthens the charter school movement, which intends to begin operations by 2019 in the state.

The Kentucky educators have been inspired by the nine-day walkout of teachers in neighboring West Virginia, which was initiated by rank-and-file educators and temporarily broke free from the grip of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). The unions, however, reasserted control over the struggle and signed a deal with the state’s billionaire governor, Jim Justice, that did nothing to address the strikers’ demands to end soaring medical costs. The small pay increase of 5 percent will be paid for by cuts to other essential services.

With the struggle of teachers spreading throughout the US, and, indeed the world, the unions have sought to corral any independent initiative of teachers, be it in Kentucky, Arizona, Oklahoma or Jersey City, New Jersey, where the unions shut down a teacher walkout after one day without so much as a vote.

Wednesday’s rally in Frankfort was dominated by the union officials and Democratic Party politicians. Stephanie Winkler, president of the Kentucky Education Association (KEA), introduced Democrats, including Attorney General Andy Beshear, state Senator Ray Jones, Minority Floor Leader Rocky Adkins, and Rep. Chris Harris, as “our friends.”

KEA vice president, Eddie Campbell urged the crowd to vote for Democrats in November.

Adkins who is considering a run for governor in 2019 against the deeply unpopular Governor Bevin had nothing to offer but empty rhetoric: “I stand with you yesterday, I stand with you today and I stand with you in the future!”

Far from defending the interests of the working class, Kentucky Democrats have done the bidding of the

corporations and the banks and imposed austerity no less brutally than the Republicans. Bevin's predecessor, Steve Beshear (the father of the attorney general at yesterday's rally) carried out deep cuts during his two terms in office from 2007 to 2015. Announcing cuts to higher education while maintaining K-12 per pupil spending near the bottom in the US, Governor Beshear boasted in 2012, "the fat has long been burned away. Now we're cutting muscle and bone."

The Obama administration oversaw the destruction of hundreds of thousands of teachers' jobs and a vast expansion of charter schools, paving the way for new attacks on public education now being carried out by the Trump administration. The Democrats, however, generally prop up the trade unions, which they utilize to suppress working-class opposition to austerity.

The sickouts in west Phoenix and Glendale clearly unnerved union officials who tried to tamp down opposition and channel it behind impotent appeals to bought-and-paid-for Democratic and Republican state legislators to "show real leadership." With tens of thousands of teachers joining Facebook pages to demand a statewide strike, the Arizona Education Association (AEA) and Arizona Federation of Teachers (AFT) have been forced to call a "day of action" on March 28.

The rally in Phoenix gave voice to some of the rank-and-file teachers who are the backbone of the movement for better wages, health and dental care, and opposition to privatization (charter schools have been entrenched in Arizona for 20 years, with 418 charter schools operating with almost no regulation.)

Teacher pay in Arizona, when adjusted for inflation, is the lowest in the nation, and was ranked the "worst state for teachers" in 2017, which takes into account not only pay but work environment. Arizona teachers could earn \$30,000 more if they move to neighboring California.

When Kassandra Dominguez, the teacher from Pendergast who led the sickout, addressed the crowd at the capitol, she was blunt about her frustration. "Teachers are tired of not receiving the funds that we need in our classrooms and in our pockets. We have teachers eating ramen noodles for dinner. We're out of college and still eating ramen."

According to [azcentral.com](http://azcentral.com), another teacher,

Tomorrah Howard, said that with two Master's degrees and \$50,000 of her own student debt still unpaid, she was unable to send her daughter to college. She asked, "Do I pick up a second job and become an Uber driver? What do I do? What are my options?"

The anger and frustration of the teachers, whether in West Virginia, Kentucky, Arizona, Puerto Rico or anywhere on the planet, is palpable. But that energy needs to be turned to the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class against both big-business parties and the giant financial and corporate interests they speak for.



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