

“This is not the civics lessons we’ve been teaching ... we’re going to see more of this!”

Thousands of Kentucky teachers rally to oppose cuts

J. Cooper
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On Monday, about 5,000 Kentucky teachers and their supporters rallied at the state capitol to demand adequate funding for public education while 800 miles away, 15,000 of their colleagues were striking and demonstrating in Oklahoma City. Teacher struggles, sparked by the nine-day strike in West Virginia and initiated by independent efforts by rank-and-file educators, are challenging years of bipartisan attacks on public education and social services throughout the US.

At the capitol building in Frankfort, Kentucky, the crowds of educators and supporters teemed through the state senate hallways and spilled onto the grounds throughout the day Monday. In a tremendous display of unity, not only teachers and school support staff, but parents, bus drivers, firefighters, emergency responders, and others attended, many with their children and grandchildren in tow. They rallied under a banner strung across the capitol steps reading, “YOU MAKE US SICK!”

In a dirty deal, the State Senate passed a budget bill which provides a meager increase in per pupil funding, which will remain well below 2008 levels, through a series of regressive measures including a new 6 percent tax on services that had previously been tax-free, primarily affecting working people.

Upon hearing the news, the crowd outside the senate chambers cried, “Shame on you!” and “Show your face!” The demonstrators were angry that secret negotiations had taken place following last Thursday’s ramming through of draconian attacks on education, just prior to the K-12 spring break in many counties. Independent of the Kentucky Education Association (KEA), teachers in 29 school districts retaliated, calling a “sick-out” last Friday and holding a spirited rally at the capitol. KEA President

Stephanie Winker described the militant job actions “unfortunate”.

On Monday, public schools were closed in all of the state’s 120 counties. While some were on spring break, the rest of the state was shut tight by the walkout, timed to coincide with the final vote in the state senate on the biennial budget.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, retired Kentucky teacher Barbara Kussow Barr said, “Teachers have been quite shocked by how bills are handled and how politics is handled. This is not the civics lesson we’ve been teaching all these years. People are not happy, and we are going to see more of this!”

Kentucky educators have been fighting for months to demand adequate education funding, oppose the growth of charter schools and to retain pension and health care benefits for retirees. From 2007 to 2015, Democratic Governor Steve Beshear presided over more than \$1.6 billion in cuts to the state budget, including starving teachers’ pension funds.

Republican Governor Matt Bevin has now demanded that new teachers be placed in a “hybrid” pension plan modeled along the lines of a 401(k), market-driven plan. The bill passed Thursday night removes the “inviolable contract” clause, which guarantees pension levels set at the hire-in date, for all teachers employed after January 1, 2019.

The biennial budget passed in the state senate on Monday has additionally zeroed out provisions for textbooks, teacher training programs and the Commonwealth School Improvement Fund. While the bill removes explicit funding for charter schools, several districts are moving ahead with their own plans to open charter schools by 2019.

The Kentucky Center for Economic Policy (KCEP) report on the budget deal reveals a whole series of broadsides against public education including a 6.25 percent cut to a number of programs including preschool and extended school services. All higher education institutions will also be cut by an additional 6.25 percent. When adjusted for inflation, the state's post-secondary institutions have been cut by a crippling 35 percent since 2008 as a result of cuts by both Democratic and Republican state administrations.

In a significant provision of the bill, tenured faculty at colleges and universities can now be fired when programs are eliminated or changed for budgetary reasons. Eastern Kentucky University, for example, "plans to cut \$25 million by eliminating 200 positions, closing its Danville campus, suspending academic programs and slashing athletics spending by 20 percent," wrote the *Lexington Herald-Leader* late last month. The new senate language mandates state law to override the academic institution's rules regarding tenure.

Additionally, the KCEP analysis pointed out that the budget proposal means that state funding for K-12 education SEEK (Support Education Excellence in Kentucky) is inching back up to only \$4,000 per student, a 16 percent cut from 2008 levels. This is one of the lowest per-pupil funding levels in the US. KCEP also noted that health care for retired teachers not yet eligible for Medicare (age 65) is only funded until 2019.

Finally, the budget bill provides lucrative new tax giveaways to Kentucky corporations which will drain \$80 million from the state coffers over the next two years. "The whole plan is a big tax shift from the wealthy and corporations to the middle class and poor," Jason Bailey, the executive director of KCEP, said characterizing the bill, emphasizing that it will disproportionately affect poor Kentuckians.

This maneuver is similar to the backroom deals implemented in both West Virginia and Oklahoma which fund small salary increases via regressive taxation policies or cuts to other vital social programs. In every case, the unions—both under the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—have lined up enthusiastically with deals which move cuts from one group of workers to the next. In West Virginia, funds were stripped from the state Medicaid program to fund a salary bump. In Oklahoma Monday, OEA (Oklahoma Education Association) President Alicia Priest hailed a budget proposal to provide an inadequate pay increase complaining that the regressive taxes on gasoline, diesel

fuel, cigarettes and gaming didn't go far enough.

These measures, blessed by the unions, were embraced by the big-business legislators because they did very little to restore education funding and, above all, because they do not impact the vast profits of the oil and gas industries.

The unions are notorious for acquiescing to this type of "whipsawing" which pits workers against each other rather than uniting all sections of the working class against the devastating attacks of the financial elite. But the dead-end policy of continuous appeals to politicians of both capitalist parties, as advocated by the KEA, AFT and NEA, has become deeply discredited, and teachers have begun to organize independently, notably utilizing social media to organize protests and walkouts.

Barr noted, "All of us are pretty appalled at the behavior of the elected representatives. ... We're learning that things have got to change with how our country is run. It isn't acceptable to see bills passed behind closed doors in secrecy when people can't digest them. The secrecy is shocking."

James H. Miller, a journalism teacher in Louisville, tweeted in the course of the demonstration, "It's really amazing to see the @KyDems party talking about supporting teachers when they went along with the pension defunding for years. We haven't forgotten."

Another tweet from a teacher at Berea College and a supporter of the public school teachers read: "I live in a state where we have to march to protect our water and our teachers. That should be a dystopian novel but it's Kentucky, a place I love & a place that frustrates me deeply. Let's stop putting villains in office, please."

The WSWS calls on Kentucky teachers to form democratically elected rank-and-file committees in schools in every county, independent of the unions and the two capitalist political parties, and coordinate with supporters of their struggle everywhere. The rebellion of educators, parents, students and public sectors workers seeking a genuine struggle against austerity, poverty and war requires that workers unite their struggles both nationally and internationally.



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