

# Kentucky teachers denounce governor for saying students were “sexually assaulted” due to walkout

J. Cooper  
16 April 2018

As thousands of demonstrators chanted and waved signs demanding funding for education, the Republican-dominated Kentucky legislature concluded its 2018 session Friday by overriding Republican Governor Matt Bevin’s vetoes of the Republican budget and tax bills.

The Kentucky Education Association (KEA) hailed the action of the Republican legislature as a “victory,” even though it leaves in place a budget that attacks teachers and public education. Teachers were being offered a “choice” between this bill and the governor’s veto of it, which would remove some funding resulting from regressive taxes.

On Saturday, after most of the demonstrators had left Frankfort, the legislature let stand SB 151 (the “sewer bill”), which shifts future teachers’ pensions to market-driven 401(k)-type plans and ends the longstanding inviolability of teachers’ and other public workers’ pensions. It will allow the state government to change or even rescind pensions in the future.

Governor Bevin vilified teachers following a protest Friday at the state capitol in Frankfort, sparking outrage among teachers and others. In his inflammatory statement to the press, Bevin said, “I guarantee you somewhere in Kentucky today a child was sexually assaulted that was left at home because there was nobody there to watch them.”

Bevin also said children were probably doing drugs or ingesting poison, “because they were home alone, because a single parent didn’t have any money to take care of them... I am offended that people so flippantly disregarded what is truly best for children.”

Bevin’s slanders were pulled straight from the talking points provided to Republican politicians facing teacher rebellions by a right-wing think tank exposed by the *Guardian* newspaper. The State Policy Network, an alliance of 66 right-wing “ideas factories,” has received funding from the Koch brothers and the De Vos family, among others. The top talking point of the list: “Teacher strikes hurt kids and low-income families.” It then provides coaching on

how best to spin the story to turn public opinion against teachers.

Comments on social media following the governor’s outrageous remarks were pointed:

“If @GovMattBevin were so concerned about children of working parents being left home alone, he wouldn’t have proposed cutting before and after school programs in his 2018 budget proposal,” read one.

Another stated, “If @GovMattBevin were so concerned about children ingesting poison, he wouldn’t have proposed cutting ALL STATE FUNDING to Kentucky’s ONLY poison control center, which gets 176 calls per day.”

The KEA called for the “day of action” Friday, making clear that it was not to be a strike and that only those teachers who could “legally” attend should do so.

However, nearly 40 school districts announced they were closing so teachers could attend the rally in the capital, after thousands of teachers called in to say they would be sick on Friday, a tactic the KEA did not endorse.

As the teachers demonstrated in Frankfort, students at John Hardin High School in Elizabethtown and Central Hardin High School in Cecilia held their own walkouts in support of the teachers, according to a report in the *Elizabethtown News-Enterprise*.

Defying the instructions of the school administration to confine the protest indoors, hundreds of students from John Hardin marched to the Hardin County Schools Board of Education building. Emphasizing that change for the younger generation starts with teachers, John Hardin senior Athena O’Neil told the *News-Enterprise*, “There is a lot that is wrong with the U.S. educational system.”

The capitol police tightly regulated admittance to the capitol building, allowing fewer than 500 demonstrators into the legislative session galleries, something that has never happened before.

The KEA had been campaigning relentlessly for the House and Senate to override Governor Bevin’s Monday veto of

the budget and tax bills, appealing to the Republican majority to reinstate the original bills in which the cuts to education and attacks on working-class income are draconian.

The budget provides no money for textbooks or teacher development, and cuts 6.25 percent from preschool and after-school programs as well as all higher education institutions. Eastern Kentucky University has already indicated it will lay off hundreds of staff. Northern Kentucky University announced on March 30 that 47 nontenured faculty, including 16 in the education department, may not have jobs next school year. The budget also puts faculty tenure in the crosshairs, allowing universities to fire tenured faculty when cutting programs for financial reasons.

While the original 33 percent cut to retirees' cost-of-living allowance was dropped, the budget will now tax public employee pension income over \$31,000, whereas the cutoff had been \$41,000.

The new tax law introduces a regressive six percent tax on common services that were previously tax-free, hitting the poorest layers the hardest. It reduces the state income tax to five percent. It is widely understood that the new taxes fall most heavily on the working class and favor the rich.

Many educators are confused, feeling they have been left with a dirty deal and no good choice. Under conditions where the union leadership hailed the overriding of Bevin's vetoes as a "victory," teachers began taking to social media Sunday to discuss the dangerous implications of the budget and tax bills that are now law.

"Trying to decide between the veto & the override was like trying to decide whether you wanted to be shot or hanged. Neither was a real victory," said one teacher's comment. Another commented, "It's a shell game. No new revenue was found. Just shifted. Onto the backs of teachers and gap students and their families, basically."

Another teacher weighed in, "All we can say is that the fight is not over and [we will] continue to advocate until we get a better outcome."

Eric, a teacher of English as a Second Language in the Kentucky schools said he felt "disheartened" when he spoke to the WSWs Friday afternoon, before the overrides had taken place. He spoke about the governor's veto and the fact that educators were being given all bad choices.

Eric also spoke of the antidemocratic methods of the politicians in putting through the pension changes buried inside the "sewer bill," a bill originally covering wastewater services. The Senate met in the early hours of Thursday, March 29. "When they passed the sewer bill at night they locked all the doors. They thought they were going to pass legislation sneaking behind people. You could hear the teachers screaming from outside the doors," Eric said.

Throughout the weeks of protest by the Kentucky educators, the KEA has made sure that teachers are afraid to strike, at every turn reinforcing the governors' threats to fire them, since teacher strikes are against the law in Kentucky. They have continuously steered all opposition toward pressuring the politicians and shackling the teachers to the Democratic Party.

The Kentucky Center for Economic Policy (KCEP) points out that education cuts have gone on for years, under both Republican and Democratic administrations. An April 4 KCEP report notes that funding for the state's postsecondary institutions has declined by 35 percent since 2008, once adjusted for inflation.

As in West Virginia and Oklahoma, the role of the teachers unions has been to stifle the anger of their members, suffocate strike action, and turn the teachers entirely in the direction of supporting Democrats in the 2018 midterm elections.

The WSWs spoke with Bill, an educator in West Virginia who was very involved with the nine-day teacher strike last March. He pointed out that the West Virginia Education Association endorsed billionaire Jim Justice, who reaped his fortune in the coalfields of Kentucky, in the Democratic Party gubernatorial primary. Once elected, Justice switched back to the Republicans, a practice he had mastered over the previous 30 years.

Many teachers in Kentucky, frustrated, but unsure how to move forward, are expressing a common sentiment: the fight is not over, and "we'll be back!" As Eric, the ESL teacher said to the WSWs, "I'm radicalized now. I'm ready to fight from here on out." And Bill from West Virginia echoed what many teachers have expressed over the past month: "A national teachers' struggle is needed."

The development of a movement to defend education in Kentucky and throughout the country requires the independent organization of teachers, through the formation of rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the control of the unions. Such committees will provide the foundation for uniting the struggles of all teachers against the efforts of the unions to subordinate their struggles to the Democratic and Republican politicians and the capitalist profit system.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**