

South Carolina teachers to rally for better pay and funding for schools

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19 May 2018

Teachers and other state employees will gather at the State House in Columbia, South Carolina today to protest low wages and poor working conditions. The demonstration follows Wednesday's rally of 20,000 teachers in North Carolina and is part of an ongoing wave of teacher strikes and demonstrations across the US and internationally.

Salaries and working conditions for educators in South Carolina are abysmal. The average salary stands at \$10,000 below the national average, while the minimum starting salary is only \$30,113 a year.

Working conditions are extremely poor. Among the worst are those schools located in the 36 districts along Interstate 95, exposed in the award-winning 2005 documentary, *Corridor of Shame: The Neglect of South Carolina's Rural Schools*. Raw sewage mixed with worms and insects flowed into the hallways of Ridgeland Elementary in Jasper County, where it was tracked into classrooms by students.

In other schools, holes in the floors of some classrooms allowed students to see into the classrooms below them. Teachers used old rags and sandbags to prevent a flood of rainwater coming in through cracks in the walls. Libraries were filled with shockingly few books, and those on hand were so outdated that one teacher recalled finding a book that predicted, "One day man will land on the moon."

Low pay and poor conditions have produced an exodus of teachers. The Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention & Advancement reported that 4,900 teachers left the school system in 2016-2017, and that there were 500 vacant positions at the start of the school year, an increase of 16 percent over the previous year.

Today's rally has been organized by the South Carolina Association of Educators, the South Carolina

State Employees Association, and a host of pro-Democratic Party organizations, including SC Progressive Network and Progress South Carolina.

The aim of the demonstration is not to oppose the conditions facing teachers or conduct a struggle, but to channel workers' anger behind the dead-end of support for the Democratic Party.

The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are enemies of public education. The conditions facing teachers are the outcome of an offensive carried out under both big business parties, at a state and federal level.

In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, South Carolina's government, under Republican Governor Mark Sanford and his successor, Nikki Haley, the current US ambassador to the United Nations for the Trump administration, passed severe education cuts, including \$800 million in 2010 alone, and the elimination of 3,600 teaching positions. From 2008 to 2014, K-12 funding was cut by 14.2 percent.

While the Democrats have claimed to oppose these measures, they have advocated the raising of revenue through the imposition of regressive taxes on the working class, including on cigarettes. Moreover, where they have been in office, as in neighboring North Carolina, under Governor Bev Perdue, the Democrats have overseen no less severe attacks, through the slashing of hundreds of millions in education funding and wages.

Over the same period, the Obama administration, under the "Race for the Top" program, oversaw the laying off of 300,000 school workers and the expansion of charter schools. The administration tied funding to states that implemented reactionary education "reform" measures, including by targeting so-called "underperforming" schools and scapegoating teachers.

There is immense opposition among teachers to these attacks. An online petition, created by the pro-Democratic Party Progress South Carolina, calling for an increase in public sector worker salaries has been signed by more than 2,300 people.

Sabrina Swinney from Marion, South Carolina, wrote on the petition yesterday, “I’ve been with the State for 35 years, 28 of those years has been in Education. I have a BS from Coker College, a Masters’ from Capella University and 30+. I am not ‘certified’ so I make \$24,000 yearly.”

Damian A. Days, Sr. wrote, “Teachers teach everybody, so we should be compensated. We teach future doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Without this foundation we have nothing.” Martha Kinard Johnson from Greenville wrote, “How dare our state talk about tax cuts with poor teacher pay and horrid roads!”

Arianna S. Derrick commented, “I am a retired SC public school teacher, administrator, and technical college instructor. I know that this state cannot function without dedicated public service workers. It is very shortsighted to try to run this state on the cheap by not paying a living wage.”

Mark Stockman from Saint Helena Island wrote, “I am a state employee who has to work two full time jobs. Beaufort County is among the highest cost of living counties in the state, yet the salaries for most state employees leaves them struggling to make ends meet each month. Where’s all the prosperity Trump promised?”

The greatest obstacles to teachers waging a struggle are the trade unions, including the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and their state affiliates. The unions have betrayed all the struggles that have erupted since the beginning of the year, including in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and Colorado, where they have shut down strike without meeting teachers’ main demands. The unions are declaring that all teachers can do is vote for the Democratic Party.

Today’s demonstration itself is being called only three days after the rally in North Carolina of 20,000 teachers, which was used by the unions to promote Democratic Governor Roy Cooper and prevent an extended walkout. On Wednesday, the SCEA called on teachers to wear red to support the North Carolina walkout, but opposed any united action. The unions

have worked above all to isolate the expanding wave of teacher strikes on a state-by-state basis and prevent it from linking up into a national movement.

The development of a struggle for public education and decent wages, jobs and conditions requires the building of new organizations, rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by teachers themselves, and hostile to the strike-breaking unions and both big business parties.



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