

# Teachers and public workers protest in South Carolina

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Around 300 teachers and public employees gathered at the State House in Columbia, South Carolina on Saturday to protest low wages and attacks on working conditions. The protest takes place in the context of a wave of teacher strikes and demonstrations across the US and internationally since the beginning of the year, including a strike by 100,000 teachers in Mexico last Tuesday.

Workers held signs that read, “Teachers need to eat too!”, “My income won’t pay my student loans!”, and “I went to college for 4 years and my paycheck is \$1,600 per month!” Many teachers complained of having to work two or more jobs to make ends meet. The minimum starting salary for teachers in South Carolina is \$30,113, among the lowest in the US.

Low pay and poor working conditions have produced a shortage of teachers in the state. More than 4,900 teachers left the state's school system in the 2016-17 school year, including 22 percent of first-year teachers. The number of graduates from teacher colleges in the state dropped by 30 percent last year, according to the Center for Education, Recruitment, Retention and Advancement.

Brian, a state employee at the Department of Health and Environmental Control, held a sign which read, “Ask me about my other job.” He told WSWs reporters, “I have several friends who are teachers. They have other jobs too. One who teaches in Gilbert is also a bookkeeper at a construction business.”

He added: “I opened a couple fireworks stands to make ends meet. I’ve been a state employee for 27 years. We’ve only had a six percent salary increase over the last 10 years. We have no spending income. We can only just pay the bills. My car has over 100,000 miles on it. Some people think state employees have good retirement benefits, but my retirement will be 48

percent of my salary and I make \$55,000 a year. That’s like \$26,000 a year to live on when I retire.

“If you go down into the heavily fortified parking garage where all the assemblymen park their cars, you’ll see nothing but Lexuses and Infinitis. These people don’t know what it’s like for us.”

The determination among workers to fight was in sharp contrast to the organizers of the rally, including the South Carolina Education Association, the local affiliate of the National Education Association; the South Carolina State Employees Association, and numerous pro-Democratic Party organizations.

The unions called the rally in order to demoralize, isolate and smother workers' opposition, and channel it behind support for the Democratic Party. The event was called on a Saturday to avoid any disruption to schools or government agencies.

All of the speakers declared that the only means of improving wages and conditions was to vote for the Democrats, including State Senator Mike Fanning. Fanning has proposed increasing public education spending by imposing regressive consumption taxes that would hit the working class, including on cars, cigarettes and gasoline.

Julie Marshall, vice-president of the York County Education Association, told the rally that Fanning “can’t do it by himself. He needs your support. Make your voice heard in the ballot box.”

Patrick Kelly, a board member of the Palmetto State Teachers Association, said that the rally “won’t mean anything unless you show up at the ballot box.”

The unions' efforts to channel opposition behind the Democratic Party provoked opposition among the workers who were present. As Kelly concluded his remarks, several teachers near the back of the crowd began chanting, “Strike, Strike, Strike!”

Speaking afterwards to WSWWS reporters, one of the teachers, who wished to remain anonymous due to threats of victimization by school boards, commented: “We’re always told to vote. There needs to be more action than that. We’ve seen it in Arizona, Oklahoma and now North Carolina. We need that here too.”

Another teacher interrupted: “Voting hasn’t worked the last 10 years!”

The strikes that have erupted in the US since the beginning of the year, in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, and Colorado, have all been betrayed by the national teachers’ unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. In each case, the unions have instructed teachers to return to work without achieving their demands, calling on them to vote for the Democratic Party in the upcoming November elections.

The reality is that the Democrats, like the Republicans, are hostile to the interests of teachers and other workers, and represent the interests of the banks and corporations. While the Democrats have not held control of the governorship or legislature in South Carolina since the mid-1990s, in neighboring North Carolina, the Democrats under Governor Bev Perdue carried out no less severe cuts to education spending and teachers’ wages. It was the Obama administration which spearheaded the expansion of charter schools and the closure of hundreds of public schools across the US.

In order to prevent the development of a unified strike by teachers, the unions have isolated each strike on a state-by-state basis. The rally in South Carolina took place only three days after a walkout of 20,000 teachers in North Carolina.

While there is immense support for a common struggle among workers, the unions have opposed any united action. In response to a photo of the South Carolina rally posted to the North Carolina Teachers United page, a teacher commented, “Wish I had known, this NC teacher would have come to rally with you!” Another said, “Let us know next time, this NC teacher is just a drive away! I will gladly come stand with you.” Another teacher commented, “Wish there had been more advertising so we could’ve shown up in droves.”

Workers commented that the unions did nothing to promote the event in Columbia. One teacher told the

WSWS, “We didn’t know about this ourselves until a few days ago. If it had been better promoted, I’m sure more people would have come.”

This month has also seen numerous smaller demonstrations by teachers, including in Maine, Iowa and Florida. On May 9, more than 100 teachers attended a school board meeting in Westbrook, Maine in protest, where teachers have been working without a contract since August 2017.

On May 8, over 200 teachers rallied in Volusia County, Florida where they demanded more than the pitiful one percent pay raise currently offered to them by the state legislature. Andrew Spar, the president of the Volusia United Educators union, threatened teachers demanding strike action, declaring, “Under state law, Volusia teachers would lose their jobs and risk their pensions if they were to participate in a walkout.”



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