

As unions try to block further walkouts

US education secretary pledges to escalate war on teachers

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In an appearance before the US House of Representatives' Education and the Workforce Committee on Tuesday, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said the Trump administration would help state governments accelerate school privatization schemes, standardized test-based performance pay for teachers and other attacks.

The billionaire heiress also said it was up to individual schools to inform US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) if they suspect their students are undocumented. "That's a school decision. It's a local community decision," DeVos said in comments that invite ICE raids in violation of constitutional protections guaranteeing all children, regardless of their immigration status, the right to a basic education.

In her opening statements and answers to questions, DeVos pushed the administration's plans to funnel public money to private and parochial schools and further starve public education of vitally needed resources. She palmed off this naked transfer of public assets to private corporate interests as protecting the "rights of students" and "empowering parents, teachers and local leaders to identify the best ways to meet the unique needs of the students they serve."

In interactions with Republican congressmen from Florida and Indiana, DeVos spelled out the administration's plans for schools across the country. "Parent-choice schools in Florida are a prime example of the hard work of reforming education meaningfully," she said. She praised "multi-pronged choice tax credit scholarship programs, grading schools and merit pay to award teachers doing an excellent job."

Indiana has the largest voucher program, with 35,000

low-income students enrolled in the Indiana Choice Scholarship program and 90 operating charter schools. "Indiana should be a model for all states," DeVos said. "This Congress can continue to encourage state leadership to adopt and expand on these programs. There should be more support from the federal level for more choices and flexibility."

The Trump administration is escalating the war on teachers and public education, which has been carried out by both big business parties for decades. The Obama administration oversaw the destruction of the jobs of hundreds of thousands of teachers and other school workers and a vast expansion of charter schools. Democrats, who currently control state governments in California, New York, Colorado, New Jersey and other states, are also spearheading corporate-backed "school reform" and attacks on teachers' wages, health care and pensions.

DeVos said nothing, nor did the Democrats on the House committee, about the wave of teacher strikes against the starving of public education at every level of government. Teacher pay has been declining since the 1990s and has worsened since the financial crash of 2008. In four states that have seen statewide strikes and mass protests, real wages have fallen since the Great Recession by 9.8 percent in Arizona, 5.6 percent in Kentucky, 15.6 percent in Oklahoma and 11.1 percent in West Virginia.

On Monday, elementary school teachers at 10 National City, California, schools voted to authorize a strike after failing to reach a salary agreement with the San Diego County school district. Of the 262 teachers who voted, 88 percent cast their vote in favor of authorizing the strike, according to a statement by the

National City Elementary Teachers Association.

The district, which has still not signed a contract for the 2017–18 school year, wants teachers to work 20 minutes extra each day in exchange for a meager five percent raise. “I’m trying my darndest to be that best educator in the classroom and sometimes I’m not, because I don’t have the materials and the support in the classroom, and it really is disappointing,” school teacher Christina Benson said.

The contract covering 33,000 teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation’s second largest, will expire at the end of June. The school board is pushing for more charter schools and shifting more health care costs onto the backs of teachers. LAUSD Board President Steve Zimmer has spoken of a coming “UAW moment” between LA Unified and its labor unions, a reference to the auto companies shifting retiree health care obligations to the United Auto Workers union, which immediately cut benefits.

Last week, 20,000 teachers and their supporters demonstrated at the state capitol in Raleigh, North Carolina, where teachers have seen a five percent decline in real wages since 2008. Per pupil spending has fallen by 12.2 percent. The North Carolina Association of Educators, the state affiliate of the National Education Association, limited the action to one day and denounced teachers in the Charlotte area who continued sickout protests on the following days.

A poll by the Louisiana Federation of Teachers found that 61 percent of teachers would be willing to take part in a statewide walkout, and 59 percent said they would be willing to take part in a mass demonstration at the capitol in Baton Rouge. The poll of nearly 4,000 teachers also found that the top issue concerning teachers was low pay. Three quarters said their salaries were below the state average of \$49,745 a year, and 78 percent said they were considering leaving the profession because of low pay. Eighty-four percent said state and local governments should both contribute to increases.

Last January, a video went viral of Louisiana teacher Deyshia Hargrave being arrested during a town hall meeting for asking why the local school board had voted to give the district’s superintendent a \$38,000 raise on top of his \$110,000 salary, while teachers in Vermilion Parish had not gotten a raise in a decade.

Hargrave noted that the decision was a “slap in the face to the teachers, the cafeteria workers and any support staff” who are “not getting a dime.” Class sizes in the district have jumped from 21 to 29 students in recent years, she noted.

An online petition, “Why I stand with Deyshia Hargrave,” was signed by tens of thousands of people, including 4,000 in Louisiana. Signatories came from across the US and throughout the world, including from Western and Eastern Europe, Russia, Brazil, India, Australia, South Africa and Algeria.

In the face of growing opposition, the unions are doing everything they can to suppress further teacher protests and divert opposition behind a campaign to elect Democrats in November’s mid-term elections. The National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers are working feverishly to prevent the unification of teachers across state borders.

The comments of DeVos make clear, however, that the assault against public education and schoolteachers is being coordinated on a national scale and driven by the profit interests of the corporations and banks that operate around the country and the world.

The fight against these powerful forces requires unifying educators and every section of the working class. Teachers should elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community to take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the strikebreaking unions and prepare for a nation-wide strike to fight for the right to high quality public education and good wages and benefits for educators.



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