

Louisiana teachers support strike for wage increase

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A poll of almost 4,000 Louisiana teachers, published on May 21 by the Louisiana Federation of Teachers (LFT), showed that more than 60 percent support a statewide walkout. The vote is yet another expression of growing opposition to low pay and underfunded schools among teachers in the United States and internationally.

The poll was conducted between April 10 and May 7 by the LFT, the state affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). More than 80 percent of teachers also said they were in favor of increasing taxes on business to fund pay raises for educators. Louisiana teachers' pay is ranked among the lowest in the nation.

According to the Southern Regional Education Board's most recent figures from 2016, the average salary in the state was \$9,000 below the national average. Almost 80 percent of teachers surveyed said they had considered leaving the profession because of the low pay. The number of students in the state graduating with teaching accreditation has fallen by 18 percent since 2011.

Teachers, bus drivers, and other school personnel in East Baton Rouge, in the state's capital, rallied in front of the school board office on May 17 to demand pay increases. Alexandra Clark, a local school psychologist, told the WAFB news station, "It's a shame that we haven't had a raise in 10 years. I've had several side jobs over the last few months. I've bartended on the side. I've sold insurance on the side."

Far fewer teachers who participated in the LFT survey said they would support other local district-wide actions, which are promoted by the unions to demoralize and isolate workers. These included a local walkout (48 percent) or a demonstration at a schoolboard meeting (47 percent).

While there is overwhelming support among teachers

for a struggle, the unions—AFT and the National Education Association—are determined to prevent any strike from occurring or developing outside of their control. LFT President Larry Carter issued a warning to legislators on May 21 that the union may not be able to prevent a walkout, stating that if the legislature does not increase school funding then teachers "may actually step up and take action sooner than we can predict."

The teachers unions are concerned to prevent teachers from coming into conflict with the state's right-wing Democratic governor, John Bel Edwards, whom the unions support and endorsed with campaign contributions in the 2015 gubernatorial elections. In February 2016, shortly after Edwards' election, Louisiana Association of Education President Debbie Meaux fawningly declared, "It's not every day that education can say we have a champion in the Governor's Mansion, but today we certainly do."

Edwards has continued the bipartisan slashing of spending on public education carried out under his predecessor, Republican Bobby Jindal, whose administration implemented large tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. After entering office, Edwards repudiated a pledge from the year before to provide \$44 million to fund teachers' pay raises.

Edwards has continued to advocate the freezing of per-student funding, which reduces real per-funding levels through inflation. Funding has remained frozen for 10 of the last 11 years. In inflation-adjusted terms, Louisiana K-12 spending fell by 12.4 percent from 2008 to 2015, according to a national study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities published last November. This placed Louisiana in the top 10 states with the largest real decline.

At the same time, Edwards' administration has carried out brutal cuts to other areas of social spending

which will hit working class students and their families. In his January budget proposal, Edwards called for an 80 percent cut to the TOPS college tuition program, and the slashing of funding for Medicaid-financed health centers aimed at helping “medically fragile” children.

The supposed “champion” of teachers hailed by the unions was labelled by President Donald Trump as his “favorite Democrat.” On May 22, in response to the massacre of more than 100 unarmed Gaza protesters, including children, by the US-backed Israeli government, Edwards signed an executive order forbidding state government agencies from doing business with companies that are boycotting Israel. Edwards declared, “Israel is America’s closest ally in the Middle East and a beacon of democracy in the region.”

The teachers unions are particularly determined to prevent any strike erupting in Louisiana because it would threaten to galvanize widespread sentiment for a strike among teachers in other states. Since the start of the year, the unions have betrayed walkouts in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, and Colorado, and worked to prevent the strikes from linking up into a national movement. In each case, the unions have ordered teachers back to work without meeting any of their main demands, calling on teachers to vote for Democrats as the only means of defending education.



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