

The Little Rock Education Association stalls on strike action in Arkansas

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Teachers continue to demand strike action across the United States, despite the fervent attempts by the unions to stamp down struggles. In the lead-up to the mid-term elections, both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have sponsored rallies and get-out-the-vote messaging on behalf of some 1,500 “teacher candidates” and various Democratic Party office-seekers, while doing everything in their power to prevent a resumption of last spring’s teacher strikes.

Teachers in the nation’s largest school district, New York City, and second largest, Los Angeles, have been kept on the job through union-agreed-upon contract extensions. 3,300 teachers in Anchorage, Alaska, have been protesting for weeks and continue to work without a contract, along with educators in Ketchikan, Alaska, whose contract expired in the spring of 2017. Teachers in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, are also working without a contract. Last week charter school teachers at 15 schools, serving 8,000 students in Chicago, voted overwhelmingly to strike; school workers in North Thurston, Washington, also approved strike action by 78 percent.

The deliberate isolation of struggles and outright sabotage by the unions is also taking a stark form in Little Rock, Arkansas, where a threatened strike was put on hold this week by the Little Rock Education Association. Instead of walking out on November 1, the union agreed to a two-week contract extension, until November 14. Negotiations will continue on election day.

The backdown by the union is particularly significant in a city that remains an iconic symbol of the defeat of pro-segregation forces 61 years ago. In 1957, nine black students, dubbed the “Little Rock Nine,” were barred from Central High School by Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus and the Arkansas National Guard. Twenty-one days later, the children, under the escort of federal troops, successfully enrolled. The upholding of the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling in 1954 and defeat of the segregationists heralded a national expansion of the right to a public education.

This week the Little Rock Education Association (LREA) sought to paralyze the militancy of teachers by placing a roadblock in the way of an all-out mobilization in defense of public education. In line with the “Remember in November”

mantra invoked by the unions over the last year, the LREA joined with other pro-Democratic funded organizations “to support public education” at a capitol rally, rather than mobilize for a strike. The Arkansas Education Association has endorsed Democratic gubernatorial candidate Jared Henderson, a former director of the pro-charter organization Teach for America.

Meanwhile, Arkansas Education Commissioner Johnny Key—allied with the behemoth Walton Family Foundation (WFF) and its privatization agenda—has seized on the contract expiration in an effort to strip the rights of teachers won over 30 years ago.

Key has provocatively demanded waivers from portions of the Arkansas state legal code, the “Teacher Fair Dismissal Act” and the Public School Employee Fair Hearing Act, in 22 so-called “failing schools.” The waivers would eliminate the steps principals are now required to meet before firing teachers, including classroom observations and the preparation of a teacher improvement plan. In other words, the waivers would end due process and make teachers vulnerable to summary firing.

Challenged on the implications of such a far-reaching change, Key told the media, “I think it wouldn’t be used like a chainsaw, it’d be more like a scalpel.” He went on to accuse teachers of excess absenteeism. “Look, if you’re not going to come to work, we’ve got to get somebody in those classrooms that will be there and can do the job and will do the job,” he said.

Adding another proviso, Key said he must have the power to end the “contract” at any point of his choosing. The district is under state control, which essentially makes Key, appointed in 2015 by Republican governor Asa Hutchinson, the “school board.”

The refusal of the LREA to call a walkout contrasts with the overwhelming community support for teachers and the principles of high quality public education for all. On Wednesday, as the contract was set to expire, 300 students from the very same Central High School walked out of classes for 10 minutes to support their teachers. Three days prior an overflow crowd of 700 jammed the downtown First United Methodist Church to support teachers and public education. Teachers and

parents have been enthusiastically picketing at Little Rock schools throughout the past week.

“I fear that what’s happening to the Little Rock School District is going to be very detrimental to the city of Little Rock,” retired teacher Pat Yates told local media THV11 after the Sunday meeting. “You can’t have a thriving city without a thriving public school system.” As a result of charter school growth, Little Rock, Arkansas, is now the state’s second largest district and serves 23,000 children.

Hundreds also turned out to protest Thursday, lining the blocks near the governor’s mansion, to back teachers. Kelsey Emerson, a special education teacher, told the media, “A lot of teachers who teach in the lower performing schools choose to teach in those schools because that’s where the need is. So you’re punishing teachers who are choosing to teach in these schools by trying to fire them for saying they’re not doing their job.”

Education Commissioner Key is a former owner of a pre-school and longtime proponent of charter schools. He loyally supports the Walton Family Foundation and has used his position to fast-track the proliferation of charter schools in the city. Privately run charter schools such as Covenant Keepers in southwest Little Rock, deemed “failing” under multiple criteria, have been kept afloat with Walton money. Meanwhile, Walton-influenced legislators have enabled a steady takeover of public school buildings to house charters and the assignment of punitive A-F labels for Little Rock schools.

The billionaire Walton family, owners of the retailing giant Walmart headquartered in Bentonville, Arkansas, are the richest family in the US and have long dominated Arkansas state government.

Seeking to impose on education the same low-wage, highly exploitative model they did on retail, the Waltons are among the foremost advocates of vouchers, charters and school privatization both statewide and nationally. Since 1992, the Walton Family Foundation has supported a quarter of the 6,700 charter schools created in the US. They doubled down in 2016, announcing \$1 billion in additional funds for school privatization and have donated generously to Teach for America.

Unsurprisingly, Little Rock, long the state’s largest school district, is a target. For his part, Key has pointed to the bipartisan character of the school privatization movement, noting that it was in 2015, under the Obama administration, that 22 Little Rock schools were designated as “priority” or low-achieving schools. In fact, former Arkansas governor Bill Clinton and wife Hillary—who sat on Walmart’s board of directors from 1986 to 1992—advocated corporate-backed “school choice” schemes and charter schools in the 1990s.

As is uniformly the case nationally, there is a direct correlation between the letter grades or “failing” designations a school receives and their proportion of low-income students. Demonstrating this well-known fact is a recent analysis by

Michael Mills, a professor of education at University of Central Arkansas, showing that “Arkansas schools receiving an A-rating had, on average, a 42.35% low-income population, while F-rated schools had low-income populations, on average, of 87.10%.”

Despite the obscene wealth of the Walton family, estimated at some \$175 billion, education in the state has been starved of resources. Public school teachers have not had a pay raise in five years and were forced to give up two days’ pay. The district has sustained cuts of \$43 million over the past four years and the closing of three schools, while new privately subsidized charter schools continue to open up every year. Also, on par with national trends, Arkansas has authorized the use of unlicensed teachers, in some cases as many as 22 in one campus. In this case as well, it is majority low-income schools which have the greatest number of unlicensed teachers.

The situation is even worse for charter school teachers in the state. Arkansas enables charter schools to request waivers from state laws on minimum teacher salaries, minimum sick leave, planning periods, class size, teaching load and more. Eighty-three percent of the state’s charter schools hold such waivers, flouting the essential conditions required for decent schools.

Just as “Little Rock” became synonymous with the struggle for equal rights in a previous period, so too a lead by Arkansas teachers in challenging the plutocratic rule of the Waltons, the Stephens, the Hunts and other billionaires would set a powerful example. To combat the bipartisan assault on public education, the first step is establishing rank and file organizations of school workers, independent of the unions, to develop a genuine plan of struggle. To take the struggle forward, such organizations should unify all school workers—charter and public, union and nonunion, statewide and nationally—together with workers throughout the US and internationally.

A socialist program is necessary to meet the demands of students, parents and educators and cut across the endless lie that there is “no money” for schools. The ill-gotten wealth of the Walton family alone would go a long way in upgrading and extending the public education system in the US and around the world.



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