

# Little Rock, Arkansas teachers' union relinquishes due process rights

Nancy Hanover  
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After weeks of rousing protests and overwhelming community support for a scheduled teacher strike, the Little Rock Education Association (LREA) in Arkansas accepted a contract last Tuesday, which violates the main demand of educators—protection of due process rights. The far-reaching attack, pushed by the pro-privatization powerhouse, the Walton Family Foundation, is part of a series of bipartisan policy changes aimed at eviscerating public sector employment rights on a national level.

The union-endorsed agreement will open the door to modification of the Arkansas Teacher Fair Dismissal Act (ATFDA), enacted more than three decades ago, and streamline the ability of the Little Rock School District to fire educators.

The one-year contract deal came just a day before it was set to expire. It was ratified by a snap membership meeting. The state board of education may meet as early as December 13 to grant waivers allowing administrators to ignore the ATFDA in “failing” Little Rock School District (LRSD) schools, those assigned D and F rankings based on standardized tests.

Last month, Arkansas Education Commissioner Johnny Key, a pro-privatization official appointed by Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson, rejected a tentative agreement because the contract did not include language for a waiver from the Arkansas Teacher Fair Dismissal Act. The ATFDA, passed in 1983, covers all school employees required to hold a teaching certificate throughout the state and requires a series of steps including hearings, counseling and improvement policies before an educational professional can be dismissed.

Following the well-worn pretext utilized by privatization forces throughout the US, the high-poverty Little Rock School District was placed under state control in 2015 citing “low test scores.” Instead of increasing funding and offering free tutoring and other educational enrichment opportunities, state and federal policies—designed by Wall Street interests and implemented by Democrats and Republicans alike—have mandated firing staff, imposing lucrative business “professional development” schemes, charterizing schools and/or shuttering them.

It is worth recalling that it was former Arkansas governor Democrat Bill Clinton who notoriously pioneered such “education reform” advocating for teacher competency

examinations and standardized testing. Hillary Rodham Clinton, enforcing those new policies, headed the Arkansas Education Standards Committee. As Clinton exited his second term as governor in 1992, a lawsuit was filed, which resulted in finding the state’s system of public education funding “inadequate and inequitable.”

The Walton family were key financial backers to Governor Bill Clinton, and heiress Alice Walton donated over \$350,000 to a pro-Hillary Clinton group during the 2016 elections, according to *Fortune* magazine.

In the wake of the contract deal, the LREA issued a statement rife with self-serving double-talk. They claimed they had preserved due process in the form of a grievance procedure “in the absence of Fair Dismissal protections.” It glossed over the fact that the contract deal accepts the right of the state to waive teacher employment protections, while calling on “community members and parents [to] stand up and speak against the waiver at the State Board meeting.”

Further, the agreement stipulates the use of arbitrary performance standards under the Arkansas Excellence and Support System to evaluate teachers, imposes a no-strike agreement, and stipulates that the contract will continue to apply indefinitely as long as next year’s negotiations are in progress.

But the union’s overriding concern—maintaining its “seat at the table” and dues base—was accomplished. After enumerating the abandonment of the teachers’ demands, the LREA notes with obvious relief, “In addition, we are able to continue to serve as the exclusive representative of the LRSD employees.”

The abject capitulation of the union should be taken by educators as a dire warning. As the state continues to strangle public education, the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state and local affiliates will take no measures except to protect their own income stream.

The outpouring of support to Little Rock educators over the past weeks, coupled with the courageous history of the “Little Rock Nine” and the defeat of right-wing segregationists in the historic confrontation of 1957, speaks to the wellspring of support for public education in the city. The last thing the unions wanted, however, was a strike that could have served as

a catalyst for a broader mobilization of workers throughout the city and the state, and, even more significantly, the resumption of mass teachers struggles that occurred over the first five months of 2018.

The deal was immediately approved by Commissioner Key, who signaled his eagerness to carry out layoffs and reorganizations: “This agreement is a win for students. A waiver from the Teacher Fair Dismissal Act gives the Little Rock School District the flexibility it needs to expedite critical staffing decisions...” Making no promises, Key added, “I’m pretty sure it would not be drastic. I think it “wouldn’t be used as a chainsaw, more like a scalpel.”

Key, as a result of the state takeover of the Little Rock schools, has near dictatorial control over policy and answers directly to Governor Hutchinson. The governor’s advocacy for extreme right-wing policies first came to national prominence as one of the House of Representatives managers who spearheaded the thoroughly antidemocratic impeachment trial of Bill Clinton, aimed at overturning the results of two presidential elections. On the state level, Hutchinson has consistently advocated for tax cuts for the wealthy and school privatization, working in conjunction with the Walton Family Foundation, and following the well-trod path of most other US state administrations.

Heirs to the Walmart fortune, the Walton family is the nation’s richest with an estimated net worth valued north of \$175 billion. They have played an outsize role in setting education policy in Arkansas and nationally. The Walton Family Foundation, based in Bentonville, Arkansas, had spent over \$1 billion to promote privatization of education as of 2016 and has promised another \$1 billion over the next five years. It is difficult to encapsulate the full influence of the Waltons on national educational policy. With their fingers and money in a gigantic network of organizations, they direct agencies for teacher training, building construction, public policy, early stage support for education entrepreneurs, Catholic school partnerships, principal training, and direct funding to at least one out of every four charter schools in the nation—seeking to undermine virtually every aspect of public education.

But these attacks have been national and bipartisan. The policy of starving public schools for resources was implemented with a vengeance by the Obama administration’s Race to the Top, and constitutes the complementary aspect of the drive to fully open education to Wall Street predations. The A-F grading system, being used to justify state takeovers of school districts, is based on the Obama-enacted Every Student Succeeds Act school index score.

The cumulative effect of the defunding of education, both nationally and statewide, has meant that the “inadequate and unequal” education crisis in Arkansas has deepened. It was announced this week that substitute teachers in Arkansas, many of whom make about \$8.65 an hour, will see an increase to \$9.25 an hour on January 1. Reportedly school districts are

already so underfunded that many will be straining to meet this poverty-level wage requirement. “It’s very hard on a lot of school districts because this comes in the middle of the school year, it wasn’t in their budget and it’s very difficult for them,” said a representative for Education Solution Services, a substitute teacher subcontractor.

Also indicating the terrible crisis facing educators in the state, the present minimum teachers’ salary stands at an abysmally low \$31,800, with Arkansas ranked 11th out of the 16 states in its region. In the aftermath of the elections, Governor Hutchinson promised to raise teacher salaries “to make sure teachers in every district make at least \$36,000 by July 1, 2023.” Lest anyone consider this promise of a drop in the bucket as a genuine advance, the reelected governor has pledged to spend about twice those projected costs on a tax cut aimed at reducing the state’s top income tax rate over the next two years.

Finally, Arkansas teachers participate in a health care system, which is increasingly underfunded, a problem strikingly similar to that which sparked the wildcat strikes in West Virginia earlier this year. In 2013, mass demonstrations of educators were held at the capitol over the near collapse of the Public School Employee plan. It is estimated that teachers in the state pay 60-70 percent of the cost of their health insurance, about double the national average.

To break through the straitjacket imposed by the corporate-backed and pro-capitalist unions, teachers should form rank-and-file committees in every school and community to oppose the attack on public education and the rights of teachers. These committees should link up their struggles with the entire working class, including the highly exploited Walmart workers. In opposition to both corporate-controlled parties, workers need a new political strategy, which is based on a socialist program, including a vast redistribution of wealth to provide high-quality public education to all as an essential prerequisite for a genuinely equal and humane society.



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