

House Education and Labor Committee: US schools are in shambles

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On Tuesday, February 12, the House Education and Labor Committee held its first hearing of the new Congress, an event which highlighted the desperate conditions in schools across the US.

As Democrat Bobby Scott of Virginia gaveled the session into order, teachers were escalating their demands by other means—on the picket lines. Three thousand striking educators in Denver struck and were enthusiastically joined by thousands of high school students. Charter school teachers from Civitas schools in Chicago had just entered the second week of their strike for higher pay. And three days prior, educators in all 55 of West Virginia’s school districts had authorized a walkout against legislation designed to open the state to charter schools, vouchers and other privatization measures.

The hearing was called to generate discussion on recently-introduced legislation, the “Rebuild America’s Schools Act,” which, Scott said, would generate \$100 billion for “physical and digital infrastructure at high-poverty schools.” As he spoke, slides of roach-infested shelves, leaking roofs, broken windows, peeling doors and black mold-covered walls flashed on the screen behind him.

Ignoring the obvious, Scott studiously avoided the word “strike,” rather saying that in Oklahoma, West Virginia, Arizona, Los Angeles “and many cities and states in between, voters are demanding greater support for public education.” Both Democrats and Republicans—determined to squash any movement of educators toward a national strike over wages, working conditions and deteriorating infrastructure—are scrambling to present some kind of minimal legislation to address the all-too-obvious disastrous state of American education.

The hearing titled, “Underpaid teachers and crumbling schools: How underfunding public education shortchanges America’s students,” lasted over three and a half hours and took testimony from four witnesses. President of the American Federation of Teachers Randi Weingarten declared that “our members are very, very grateful for the focus of this hearing and for legislation that will invest in

school resources and infrastructure.” Also invited was Ben Scafidi, an economist and fellow with EdChoice—a national school choice advocacy group founded by right-wing economist Milton Friedman—who promoted the “free market” model to determine teacher salaries during the hearing, as well as Sharon Contreras, superintendent of Guilford County schools in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Anna King, membership vice president of the National Parent Teacher Association.

In his opening remarks, Rep. Scott referred to the latest “State of Our Schools” report, which, he said, demonstrates that school facilities are “underfunded by \$46 billion every year,” but what he omitted was that the same report indicates that \$145 billion is needed every year to modernize and maintain the US’s public school facilities. These extraordinary sums expose the staggering inadequacy of his Rebuild America’s Schools Act, which would barely cover one year’s maintenance and construction.

He called for a “bipartisan effort” to press for resources dedicated to school infrastructure as part of President Trump’s promise of a “massive infrastructure package to rebuild America.” He noted in passing that America’s teachers earn on average 30 percent less than other college graduates with equivalent degrees and experience.

Weingarten outlined a few of the indices of systemic underfunding of education including the closure of two elementary schools in Philadelphia due to major mold growth; one-third of Detroit school buildings found to be in “unsatisfactory” or “poor” condition; school closings in Baltimore last winter as indoor temperatures plunged to the 30s and 40s; and textbooks so outdated they showed George W. Bush as the president—widely shared on social media during the strike last spring in Oklahoma. She also mentioned the American Society of Civil Engineers’ 2017 report card giving school facilities across the country a D+.

She did not include in her testimony the fact that, as president of the AFT for decades, she has consistently sabotaged any independent or coordinated strike action by teachers to oppose these abysmal conditions, playing an

outright strikebreaking role in each and every part of the country. This included her heavy-handed shut-down of the “sickouts” among Detroit teachers in 2016 which demanded action precisely on the above issues. Of course, Weingarten would not need to reiterate to the assembled politicians such facts, because she was called to testify precisely because the AFT, together with the National Education Association, have openly colluded with Democratic and Republican administrations alike in privatizing education and imposing growing austerity on schools.

In the wake of this long record of starving public education, the burden of most school infrastructure maintenance and capital construction now falls on the local communities, primarily through property tax assessments. The federal government covers less than 10 percent of infrastructure maintenance and operation costs, zero dollars for improvements, and totally inadequate resources for instruction.

In fact, the combined federal contribution to education is only 8 percent, leaving the lion’s share of costs coming from state and local revenues—sales, income and property taxes—all of which have declined precipitously since the 2008 recession. To date, 29 states still have not restored education spending to pre-recession levels. Teacher salaries nationwide are still below those of 2007. As many teachers have pointed out, even with an 11 percent pay increase, that would put them just 1 percent above where they were before the 2008 crash.

The Democrats and Weingarten several times referred to Title I legislation that originated in 1965 as a response to the civil rights movement, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which began in 1975. Appallingly, these federal programs have never been fully funded; in the US spending authorization and actual appropriation of dollars are two distinct congressional functions. In fact, the federal government has never contributed more than 16 percent of authorized funds to the nation’s schools. Federal aid for disabled students was cut by 12 percent under the Obama administration, while Trump’s 2018 budget called for even greater cuts. The program is essentially on rations, with special education in crisis throughout the country.

The Republicans used the testimony of Ben Scafidi to aggressively push the administration’s agenda for school privatization. Scafidi claimed that teacher pay could increase if money spent on “non-teaching” personnel was reduced. He was called on numerous times, primarily by Republican committee members, to reinforce their demand for increased charter schools, vouchers and “less government regulation.”

Scafidi claimed that test scores in Florida and Arizona showed “tremendous gains” because they are the two states “that permit the most choice to charter and private schools. ...

their eras of enhanced school choice.” He never mentioned, nor did any witness or politician of either party, that the increase in non-teaching personnel might in some way relate to the layoff of over 350,000 educators in 2008. The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities noted in 2017 that there remains a shortfall of 135,000 teaching staff since that time.

The most recent strike in West Virginia explicitly opposed the introduction of charter schools, while the defense of public education and the demands to fund public education have been at the center of every walkout by educators over the past year. At this congressional hearing none of the congressmen and women, nor Randi Weingarten, challenged the growth of charter schools or the draining of resources from the public coffers to pay for charter schools or the expansion of vouchers in many states. The mantra of Weingarten has long been “school reform with us, not without us,” while the union is increasingly vying for the dues money of charter school teachers.

Newly-elected Democratic representative from Connecticut, Jahana Hayes, 2016 National Teacher of the Year (and the only teacher on the congressional committee), in her testy response to Scafidi, invoked the government response to the 2008 crash, “... We’re talking about this from an economic standpoint, in dollars and cents. That’s not what education looks like. This is not an economist problem. ... If we are treating education and schools like corporations, then I would also say we need a two trillion dollar bailout. This is a profession. This is not mission work.”

However, none of the politicians at this hearing would countenance such a proposal, just as none would consider challenging the blank check given to the military or Homeland Security year after year. Teachers will continue to fight for the necessary funding of public education and the wages they deserve, but it will not come from the Democrats, Republicans or through the efforts of the unions. The resources necessary to expand and upgrade free, public and high-quality education must come through the expropriation of the wealth of the billionaires and corporations, whose wealth was created by the working class.



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