

Union describes walkout as “disruptive”

Kentucky teachers’ sickout closes state’s largest district

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Louisville, Kentucky area teachers carried out a “sickout” action Wednesday, March 6, affecting more than 100,000 students and forcing a closure of the state’s largest school district. The mass action, organized by a new group calling itself “JCPS Leads,” forced Jefferson County Public Schools to cancel school for the second time in the space of a week.

Overflow crowds, dressed in red, have continued to jam hearings at the state legislature in Frankfort to oppose a raft of anti-public education bills. On February 28, schools were also closed in Jefferson, Fayette, Carter, Madison, and Berea Counties after teachers called out sick en masse to protest HB 525, which would change oversight of the teacher retirement system.

Yesterday’s powerful “sickout” was predictably attacked by Republican Governor Matt Bevin who maligned it as “a handful of activists” interested in money and power. But, increasingly worried that the growing anger of teachers is moving outside their control, the local affiliate of the Kentucky Education Association echoed such slanders, calling the sickouts “disruptive” and “undermining” community support.

The Jefferson County Teachers Association’s (JCTA) statements prompted a firestorm of outrage among teachers. Commenting on Facebook, one teacher said, “Wow JCTA. Way to immediately throw the teachers you represent under the bus. Every parent response I was reading last night was in FULL support of teachers. We finally get them on our side and you throw us to the wolves. Shame on you.”

Many other similar statements followed including, “I am officially resigning as the building Rep for JCTA...”

On Tuesday, HB 205, characterized as a back-door

“school choice” vouchers bill, was discussed in committee. The bill would provide scholarship tax credits for private schools and siphon off per-pupil funding for districts. It is in line with a February 28 initiative announced by US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos to establish a \$5 billion federal tax credit system in order to dramatically increase “school choice” at the expense of public education.

Both DeVos’ Education Freedom Scholarship and Opportunity Act and HB 205 enable individuals or businesses to “donate” to “scholarships” for private schools and be, for all practical purposes, “reimbursed” with dollar-for-dollar tax credits. The subterfuge, championed by the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council is viewed as a means to bypass Blaine Amendments or state constitutional prohibitions, such as Kentucky’s, on government funding of private and religious schools and open the door to mass privatization of schools.

Last Monday, students and school superintendents rallied at a press conference held to oppose HB 205 at the Northern Kentucky Educational Cooperative. All 173 district superintendents across the state have voiced opposition to the bill, which is estimated to cost \$50 million within the first four years. Another bill in the Senate, SB 250, would strip power from school-based decision-making councils to select principals—a change that would directly impact Jefferson County schools.

The previous “sickout” on February 28 was organized by “KY 120 United” which is affiliated with other “United” organizations that have come to the fore in teacher strikes across the country. These groups network with the union themselves alongside pro-union, pseudo-left outfits such as the International

Socialist Organization, *Jacobin* magazine and Labor Notes.

While KY 120 United has called on teachers to assemble in Frankfort to protest bills that attack the retirement and pensions of teachers, it also denied any involvement in Wednesday's sickout in Louisville. The Louisville *Courier-Journal* reported that KY 120 United "had asked its members Tuesday night to focus on calling legislators, rather than calling out from school." In a statement, the group said it "did not ask for JCPS to take action."

JCPS Leads members assembled at the Louisville Metro Hall Wednesday morning to caravan to the capitol for a protest. Tim Hill, a Shawnee High School teacher, told WDRB News that they felt compelled to organize because they had been pushed away by the other groups. "It was implied by other organizations to try to kind of take our own stance," he said. "It wasn't necessarily said directly by them, but it became a situation where we felt the need at JCPS to mobilize ourselves."

Jefferson County Teachers Association President Brent McKim responded by attacking the group stating, "I think when you have a number of social media groups and then they splinter into other social media groups, it's a lot of confusion among the public, among teachers and its problematic."

When the union posted on Facebook that it "did not recommend this action by educators and is concerned that continued disruptions of this nature not only unduly disrupt families and the learning process for students, but consequently undermine community support for educators and public education," teachers and parents reacted, seething with anger. The JCTA announcement was met with a crush of comments supporting the JCPS Leads sickout and charging the unions with inaction in the face of the attacks on public schools.

"We have to take charge," said one teacher. "This is an unnecessary post as YOU are supposed to be our supporters. Our UNION. Why do we pay SO MUCH every paycheck for no guidance, no stance, no support, no action. WE are doing this for the kids. As teachers, we're coming to realize that no one really has our back but each other. I'm sorry you don't support our decision, but please support the teachers."

"Maybe if you showed an ounce of leadership this

wouldn't be happening. The yellow scarves [supporters of HB 205] were there yesterday to do away with YOU," another teacher said.

"As a parent I find this extremely concerning that you are not supporting teachers, public schools or the future of MY CHILD!" declared a parent. "Shame on you."

At stake is the existence of public education itself. Since the recession a decade ago, Kentucky has suffered brutal cuts to K-12 funding. The school formula funding is approximately 13 percent less per pupil today than it was in 2008 after adjusting for inflation, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. School counselor staffing is at dire levels in the state, with only one for every 1,000 students. "Schools have had to cut back on art and music, course offerings, student supports and sometimes even special education services," explained Ashley Spalding, Senior Policy Analyst at the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy. "And they've reduced staff and have been unable to provide needed raises."

Kentucky teachers are witnessing first-hand the pernicious role of the unions. To take the struggle of teachers forward requires breaking out of the straitjacket of these pro-capitalist organizations and linking up with the struggles of workers nationally and internationally. The WSWs Teachers Newsletter urges the formation of independent rank and file committees, answerable to teachers themselves. Contact us today for more information at: wsws.org/teachers



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