

Jefferson County, Kentucky teachers continue sickouts in defiance of unions

Our reporter
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A week after Kentucky teachers conducted a job action to protest legislation attacking pensions and public schools, teachers in the state's largest school district in the Louisville area have staged two days of sickouts in defiance of the unions. On Thursday, Jefferson County Public School teachers were joined by school workers in Meade, Oldham, and Bullitt counties, resulting in the closure of hundreds of schools.

The Louisville-area teacher actions are organized by a new group calling itself "JCPS Leads." The organization is independent of the Kentucky Education Association (KEA), the Jefferson County Teacher Association (JCTA) and the union-affiliated KY 120 United group that was behind the February 28 rally at the capitol in Frankfort.

Teachers have returned to the capitol one year after the wave of strikes and actions that swept across the country in 2018 and have continued to expand in the US and internationally. Kentucky teachers did not conduct an official strike last year to oppose attacks on cost-of-living increases and retirement benefits, but the same issues have now resurfaced at a higher level. Teachers carried signs demanding, "Fund our schools" and chanted slogans like, "We won't stop."

Currently the state's Republican-controlled General Assembly is attempting to push through multiple anti-public school initiatives endorsed by US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council lobbying organization. These forces aim to privatize public education through vouchers, charter schools, and the funneling of tax money into homeschooling, private and religious operations.

The sickouts this week are most directly in response to Kentucky House Bill 205, which provides a tax break for individuals or businesses who "donate"

money towards state "scholarships," which would be paid to parents to send their children to private schools. The aim is to divert tax revenue from public schools into tax credits to subsidize private schools. In addition to draining more money from the private schools this would also hive off more students from the public schools, resulting in a further loss of per-pupil funding.

HB 205 passed the House Education Committee but may stall in the general House. If so, the tax credits contained in the bill may be reintroduced through the back door in another bill, HB 354, after the General Assembly's regular session ends March 28.

Last week, classes were canceled after teachers turned out by the hundreds to protest HB 525, an effort to "restructure" the Teachers' Retirement System's Board of Trustees. This would remove or weaken the union's representation on the board, along with educational professionals, and replace them with business and religious interests. HB 525 may be voted on at any time, as it is listed on the "House Orders of the Day."

Another bill, Senate Bill 250, would give the power of principal selection to district superintendents rather than local school councils. This would further undermine any input from parents, teachers, and other school workers; and strengthen district administration and political establishment control, especially in larger districts like Jefferson County. That bill passed out of committee Wednesday and awaits a vote by the Senate.

School employees, administrators, and the public are overwhelmingly opposed to these attacks. Republican Governor Matt Bevin has denounced and vilified teachers in the press, stating that their actions are "harming" students. On Twitter Wednesday night, Bevin sniped, "Tomorrow is a school day in Kentucky... School children should be in school... Learning..."

On Wednesday, the union denounced JCPS Leads sickouts in terms similar to those of the governor. JCTA local President Brent McKim told local NBC affiliate WAVE 3 News that teachers could go into the schools if they wished and implied that the independent initiative of teachers on social media was causing chaos. “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 it’s problematic.”

On Thursday, JCTA worked out a deal with the school district in hopes to shut down the sickout protests that have closed the Jefferson County schools. In a video on the union’s Facebook page Thursday night, JCTA President McKim said, “We have worked out a memorandum of agreement with the school district which would allow us to have almost 500 teachers in Frankfort in each of the four remaining days that the state legislature is in session, and at the same time be able to keep the public schools open for our students.”

Under the scheme, JCTA site reps would take three volunteers from each school every day to send to Frankfort, and the district would replace the teachers taking a day off with substitutes.

In an effort to justify the union’s strikebreaking action, McKim echoed the lies of state officials claiming continuing the sickouts would hurt low-income families and erode support in the community. He also said any days called off would have to be made up at the end of the school year and threatened that protesting teachers could lose their health care insurance. Finally, in an even more craven vein, McKim said the continuing sickouts could lead wavering state legislators to believe that “teachers are crazy” and convince them to vote for the reactionary legislation.

JCPS Leads organizer Tim Hill, a Louisville high school teacher, stated that the walkouts were necessary because the union was refusing to take action. “Our presence is needed, in any form or fashion,” he told WAVE 3 News. “JCPS Leads is about creating an opportunity for JCPS teachers in Jefferson County to have a voice for our unique issues.”

Hill downplayed the differences between the teachers who walked out and the union, expressing the hope that any divisions could be worked out, but adding, “only

time will tell.”

If one thing has been demonstrated by the teacher struggles that have erupted in neighboring West Virginia and across the country over the last year it is the unbridgeable gap between the strivings of teachers to defend their living standards and fight for increased funding for their students, and the unions, which function as tools of the corporate and political establishment. Far from uniting educators across counties and states to oppose the war of teachers and public education, the national unions and their state and local affiliates have been desperately seeking to suppress the resistance of teachers to the attacks of both corporate-controlled parties.

This underscores the need for the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, which will fight to mobilize the working class against austerity and social inequality.



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