Aiming to quash strikes, US teacher union launches campaign to prop up Democrats

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12 March 2019

As educators across the US continue to escalate strikes and protests, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has announced a well-funded public relations and lobbying campaign to ostensibly reverse "disinvestment in public schools."

The initiative's real aim, however, is to put an end to the past year's protests and strikes by diverting teacher opposition into impotent appeals to the very same Democrats and Republicans who have starved the public schools of funding. This is so transparent that even *Education Dive*, a largely apolitical news aggregator, was prompted to note, "In other words, the string of protests, rallies and walkouts is likely to end soon."

According to the March 4 announcement by the AFT, the union will roll out an aggressive "six-figure" ad campaign in 14 states under the slogan, "Fund Our Future." As part of the effort, the well-heeled union executives will double down on lobbying and cash donations to politicians.

In the last election cycle, such hand-outs to politicians and lobbyists amounted to a massive $40 million. Yet, as record numbers of teachers took to the picket lines last year, *none* received a penny in strike pay. Instead, the cash-strapped and embattled educators were told to use GoFundMe or fill out demeaning and lengthy forms in hope of a small contribution from the union's coffers.

Fund Our Future is deceivingly described as "supercharg[ing] the work teachers, parents and students have been doing" by formulating "a set of comprehensive demands to take to the halls of state legislatures and Congress."

As the graphic designers at the AFT headquarters get busy promoting big business politicians, teachers continue to take to the streets. Protests took place yesterday at state capitols in Oklahoma, Austin, Texas and Annapolis, Maryland. Last week, teacher sick-outs closed schools in defiance of the union in Kentucky, a mass demonstration in Indianapolis drew teachers from across Indiana, and educators rallied before and after school in Florida and demonstrated *en masse* in Waterbury, Connecticut.

These are only the most recent events in the rising tide of teacher strikes, from West Virginia (in 2018 and Feb. 18-19, 2019), Kentucky (2018 and Feb. 28, Mar. 6-7, 2019), Los Angeles (Jan. 15-25, 2019) and Oakland, (Feb. 21-Mar. 1) California, Denver (Feb. 11-14, 2019), Washington state districts (between Aug. 23-Sept. 18, 2018), Oklahoma (Apr. 2-12, 2018), Arizona (April 26-May 3, 2018) and others. New actions are brewing in states that haven't seen walkouts in decades, including Alaska, Utah, Idaho, Louisiana and more.

For obvious and well-founded reasons, the AFT, whose president Randi Weingarten is a leading member of the Democratic National Committee, is fearful of losing political control. The growing militancy of teachers, born of decades of massive attacks on public education, is driving an escalating class struggle and is strengthened by the similar actions of teachers around the world.

At the same time, as the assortment of potential Democratic candidates for the US presidential campaign in 2020 assembles, the AFT is trying to paint the Democrats as friends of teachers, even though their party has waged a decades-long attack on public education. Among the potential presidential nominees are Kamala Harris, who has received backing from the school-privatizing Eli Broad Foundation, and Cory Booker, a protégé of current Trump education secretary Betsy DeVos.

Having so far survived the threatened dues income loss portended with last June's Supreme Court ruling in Janus v. AFSCME, the union is increasingly wary, not only about its all-important revenue stream but also its long-term credibility. The campaign is, above all, directed at keeping teachers tied ideologically to the two capitalist political parties and restricted to what the bloated financial interests on Wall Street say is "affordable."

Therefore, the policy of the unions in every locality is to operate as political police, isolating struggles, preventing teachers from unifying across regions, and forcing through deals for as little as possible. As a result of this series of criminal betrayals, teachers now find themselves back at "square one" or worse. West Virginia educators still have no fix to their healthcare system, and Kentucky teachers' pensions continue to be attached. Oklahoma teachers were back protesting at the capitol yesterday. The small bump in pay they received in the aftermath of their strike did nothing for school funding and failed to remediate the massive drop in pay they have suffered since 2010. In the most recent betrayal, Oakland, California teachers were sent back to work on March 1, only to face $22 million in cuts within 24 hours, including outright school closures.

The unions, and their pseudo-left apologists in the Democratic Socialists of America, Jacobin, BadAss Teachers, the International Socialist Organization, etc., have described every strike as a "historic victory," with the inane claim, "when we strike, we win." Such platitudes have nothing to do with reality, but everything to do with the political stake these fake socialists have in propping up

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the union apparatus. This includes lucrative positions in the leadership of the United Teachers Los Angeles, the Chicago Teachers Union and others.

A new report, issued March 6, by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, confirms that formula funding remains well below 2008 levels in all of the states where strikes occurred. It also notes that the small increases announced in some states were primarily accomplished through regressive taxes or cuts in social programs, and they will only be temporary.

The Trump administration has taken the measure of the unions and is now pushing a federal $5 billion in "tax scholarship" initiative for privatization of education, while on the state level such schemes are being debated in numerous states, including Kentucky, West Virginia, Arizona and Oklahoma.

The AFT says it will serve "as a national clearinghouse for advocacy," holding "community events, rallies, lobby days and petition drives …daily." In other words, the national effort will be a frenetic series of activities designed to forestall teachers from drawing a balance sheet of the long bipartisan attack on education and the role of the unions in isolating and sabotaging their strikes.

As part of the rollout of "Fund Our Future," the AFT links what purports to be a survey of the last ten years entitled, "A Decade of Neglect: Public Education Funding in the Aftermath of the Great Recession." Far from substantiating the union's praises for American capitalism and its political representatives, the portrait of the systematic defunding of the US educational system is an indictment of the economic and political system and the union's collaboration with both big business parties. A more appropriate title would have been "A decade of treacherous sellouts."

While AFT President Weingarten rakes in over $500,000 a year, handsomely paid for services rendered to Wall Street, "A Decade of Neglect" notes that public schools remain $9 billion short of the annual funding they received in 2008, while state colleges remain $15 billion short. In Georgia, the AFT says, 70 percent of schools have shortened the school year, 80 percent of districts have had to furlough teachers, and 42 percent have eliminated art and music. Similar indices of crumbling infrastructure, growing class sizes, effective cuts in teacher pay, and lack of school counselors and nurses are noted across the board.

"School reform with us, not without us," the mantra of the AFT, has been shown to be open collusion with the billionaires who are looting the "education market" in plain sight. The union is solely focused on its position as a middleman in negotiations—a labor contractor—looking after the health and welfare not of teachers, but of the labor apparatus. As Weingarten attested in her legal brief associated with *Janus*, the union is committed to "labor peace" in exchange for its legal standing and dues checkoff.

The unions throw in their multi-millions not to strengthen the struggle of teachers but to finance their enemies in the Democratic Party. This is because the Democrats, as opposed to the Republicans, tend to prop up the financial and institutional interests of the unions, which the Democrats see as useful tools to suppress teacher opposition and impose austerity.

In this vein, the AFT's potted history puts the entire blame for the defunding of public schools at the feet of the Republicans. As would be expected, the words "Race to the Top" are omitted, as is mention of the unprecedented privatization of education under the administration of Barack Obama. The "decade of neglect" itself corresponds almost entirely to his Democratic Party administration. Title I, the federal program for impoverished schools, the AFT says "has been underfunded year after year." Obama, endorsed by the AFT both in 2008 and 2012, slashed Title I by 11 percent.

The fact is that, uniformly across the US, Wall Street, big business and the two political parties have collectively accelerated their war on public education. In no state or city—whether "wealthy" or "poor"—whether run by Democrats as in Los Angeles or Oakland, California, or Republicans as in West Virginia or Oklahoma—have there been any serious concessions made to striking teachers, and certainly none which affected the wealth of the elite.

Nor has the AFT any intention to tamper with the grotesque social inequality that plagues every aspect of society. Under conditions in which three billionaires own more wealth than the bottom half of Americans, the AFT advises measures which range from the ever-so-modest--increase taxes up to 13% on income over $1 million and a surtax on carried interest—to the outright reactionary—raising regressive sales taxes, which fall disproportionately on the working class, and slashing other vital social programs.

The "unions" do not unite workers but divide them. They do not mobilize workers to fight but seek to quash strikes. They are not "workers' organizations," but tools of the corporate and political establishment, which are led by highly paid functionaries who part of the top one and two percent of income earners in America.

It is time that teachers create new rank and file organizations of educators, school workers and students, which are independent of the unions, and fight to unify teachers and all sections of the working class in a national strike to defend public education and oppose austerity and social inequality.

Public education and the private profit system are no longer compatible. Workers must break free from the grip of the two big business parties, which subordinate them to the ever-more rapacious appetites of Wall Street. Instead a mass political movement of the working class is needed to conduct a frontal assault on the ill-gotten billions piled up by the hedge funds and corporate elites. The fight for public education means a fight for socialism and the establishment of a society based on social need, not private profit. Only in this way can the wealth produced by workers be owned and controlled democratically, and every individual guaranteed the social right to an education, a decent job, a livable income, health care, and access to culture.

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