

Mississippi teachers threaten first strike since 1985

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8 April 2019

Anger is rippling through Mississippi, with educators threatening their first walkout in that Deep Southern state in more than 38 years.

On March 28, the state legislature passed an insulting \$1,500 pay raise for teachers and assistant teachers after decades of deep and sustained cuts to public education. The measure, passed near the conclusion of the recent legislative session, was promptly followed by a \$2 million boondoggle for a school privatization program.

Teachers are now discussing the possibility of striking in a state which has seen no such action since 1985 and under conditions where they face draconian penalties for walking out. "It's time to put up or shut up" wrote one educator on social media, "We have nearly 40,000 followers of this page [Pay Raise for Mississippi Teachers]. It is time we discuss what it will take to organize a strike."

"This shows no respect for our profession," a Rankin County educator wrote. "Without education being a priority, our state will never move from the bottom," referring to the fact that in Mississippi teacher pay is 50th out of 50 states. The raise, which will take effect July 1, will bring assistant teachers from an astoundingly low \$12,500 a year to an equally meager \$14,000.

The bill apportioning the raise was passed on the second-to-last day of the 2019 legislative session. Commenting on the derisory increase, which amounts to a little over \$100 a month, House Education Chairman Rep. Richard Bennett (R-Long Beach) stated, "It's not where we want to be, it's what we can do."

Repeating the same specious mantra that there is no money to fund public education, House Speaker Philip Gunn (R-Clinton) claimed, "We obviously would love to do much more than that. But that is all we could do. That is all the taxpayers could sustain. So we did as much as the taxpayers could afford."

However, on that same day, a bill for the Department of Finance and Administration (DFA) was passed that, purportedly unbeknownst to a majority of the legislators, included a \$2 million increase for a private school education

program. That amount, a part of \$27 million of taxpayer money apportioned by the bill for state projects, is intended to increase the Education Sponsorship Account (ESA) program from \$3 million to \$5 million.

ESA programs have been adopted in various states as a Trojan Horse to effect the privatization of public education. In Mississippi, the ESA utilizes public education funds to provide "scholarships" for special needs children to attend private schools. From its inception in 2015, the program has received \$9 million and has awarded over 800 "scholarships." In other words, special needs children are being used as pawns to transfer public money to private schools and distract attention away from the reality facing public school teachers. Since last December, the ESA program has been repeatedly accused of lack of oversight over the handling of its funds.

The \$2 million boost for ESA is one of a raft of measures promoted by the pro-privatization organization Empower Mississippi. The organization's political action committee has donated almost \$100,000 to Republican representatives in the promotion of "school choice." Among its recipients is Lieutenant Governor Tate Reeves, who presides over the state senate and strongly backed the DFA bill.

The 21-page measure was one of the last items on the session's agenda and passed in the Senate in one minute. The bill received support from both Democrats and Republicans. It took three votes in the House to finally send it off to Republican Governor Phil Bryant's desk. Defending the appropriation of public funds for a private school program in a bill unrelated to the Department of Education, Gunn stated on March 28 that "it was the Senate's money."

In a state that has 165 operating public school districts, 882 public schools, and where 90 percent of students attend public schools, public school teachers make the lowest salaries in the entire country. The average salary for Mississippi teachers during the 2017-2018 school year was \$43,000, almost \$20,000 less than the \$60,000 national average, and almost \$10,000 less than the southeastern average.

Along with other assaults on public education, the abysmal pay rate has created a terrible teacher shortage in Mississippi, especially in the northwestern Delta region. Many teachers wind up leaving the state because they cannot afford to live. Some leave the profession altogether or take on additional jobs.

“I don’t know a single teacher who’s childless who doesn’t have at least one roommate,” said Kaitlyn Barton, a high school English teacher at Clarksdale High School, and whose salary is less than \$37,000. “I have a roommate. Some people live in houses of four and five people just to lower rent enough to get by.”

Since the late 1990s, teachers, supporting staff, parents, and students have only twice seen the state’s education budget fully funded by the state Legislature. Some of the state’s public school districts, such as the second largest, the Jackson Public School District, have suffered millions of dollars in budget cuts, in addition to student enrollment declines following the introduction of charter schools.

In the wake of the developments since March 28, the Facebook group Pay Raise for Mississippi Teachers has attracted 40,000 followers in under a week. As of this writing, the group has not officially advocated any specific action, but published a recent survey by the Mississippi Association of Educators (MAE) which suggests as options: “a rally at the state Capitol on a Saturday, after-work picketing, campaigning for candidates, and boycotting business that donate to ‘anti-public education candidates’.” The survey also asks about a one-day sickout and whether teachers could “walk out on a specific day and refuse to return for an indefinite amount of time.” No results have been announced.

The state has only had one significant teacher strike, 38 years ago, when more than 9,000 teachers walked off the job, defying the law and the Democratic Governor William Allain. That action won a \$4,400 pay raise, but state lawmakers responded with perhaps the most vicious anti-strike legislation in the country.

The 1985 law, which defines strike action extremely broadly to include even a “slowdown,” calls for terminating striking teachers and permanently barring them from public schools. Additionally, local school boards are prohibited from closing schools during a strike and are required to report the names of strikers to the attorney general. The law calls for \$20,000 a day fines to striking teacher groups should they disobey a court order. Moreover, in 2014, the Mississippi legislature made itself the exclusive authority over labor agreements or collective bargaining and illegalized mass picketing or demonstrations. The fine is \$500 or up to six months in jail.

Current Attorney General Jim Hood, a Democrat running

for governor this year, when asked about his attitude towards these reactionary laws, refused to dissociate himself from the draconian measures, stating, “We can’t opine on a statute, nor can we speak about something that hasn’t taken place.”

There is growing anger among educators against the attacks on both public education and democratic rights. One teacher posted, “These districts who ‘monitor’ social media and that fear of retaliation is just not right. That goes against free speech! Teachers in public schools have 1st amendment rights, too.”

The response of the 5,000-member MAE, in line with the National Education Association (NEA) with which it is affiliated, is to channel teachers’ opposition into voting for so-called “pro-education” Democrats and Republicans. MAE President Joyce Helmick noted, “Educators are furious and they have every right to be.” She followed up with, “to those who chose not to stand with Mississippi’s educators: Please know we won’t forget this betrayal come November.”

“Remember in November” has been used by the teachers’ unions from West Virginia to Oakland, California, to derail strikes and force through rotten contracts. Above all, this treacherous slogan has been devised to politically emasculate growing struggles and keep them constrained to what the two parties of big business deem to be “affordable.”

It is a bare-faced lie that there is “no money” for education. As has been demonstrated once again in the concluding session of the Mississippi legislature, there are millions for privatization policies but nothing for teachers. Such contrasts would have to be increased exponentially to give a glimpse of the trillions which have been funneled from the working class to the wealthy over the past period, with trillions more allocated to the death and destruction in ever-expanding predatory wars.

Enough is enough. Teachers must begin the fight to create democratically elected and operated rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees, independent of the trade unions and all Democratic or Republican operatives. The struggle for the full funding and expansion of high-quality public education, the fight to abolish poverty and provide a decent future for the working class requires a socialist and internationalist program. Contact the WSWS Teachers Newsletter to get involved today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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