

Tennessee teachers organize protests over educational funding and vouchers

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Teachers across Tennessee have been holding “walk-in” protests before classes and have called a sickout and noon rally at the state capitol in Nashville for today, April 9. Educators are voicing their opposition to a proposal by the state’s new governor to increase charter schools and implement a voucher scheme. Teachers are also demanding increased salaries and school funding.

“There are a lot of teachers holding second jobs because they cannot support themselves at the salaries they are being paid, and the state seems to be moving as fast as it can in the wrong direction,” Nancy, a school volunteer, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“Because the district cannot provide us another body, another teacher, those children suffer—and it’s because of the money,” school counselor Constance Wade said at a town hall in February. She described first-graders “almost packed in like sardines.”

Teachers and their supporters have organized informational pickets in the morning before classes during the past two weeks. More than 150 protesters also demonstrated at the Knox County Lincoln Day dinner last Saturday as Republican Governor Bill Lee promoted his “educational savings account” (ESA) program with the oft-used lie that such a program, which would drain money from public schools, would “help” the underprivileged. He stated, “I’ve signed this education savings account to specifically target low-income kids that are stuck in a failed school that is not giving them a quality education.”

While states like Kentucky, West Virginia, Arizona, and Oklahoma have seen wildcat strikes and student walkouts, anger in Tennessee has been kept to a simmer until now. But Governor Lee’s decision to make the voucher plan a legislative centerpiece has rapidly brought anger to a boil.

Lee’s plan, projected to begin in the 2021-2022 school year, would set aside \$75 million over three years to launch the ESA program. It is estimated that ultimately 15,000 students from public schools would be funneled into alternative, private schools. By 2024, Lee is proposing to spend \$125 million on the voucher-style program. In a vicious anti-immigrant rider to the reactionary legislation, the state Department of Education would be required to verify a recipient’s legal status.

Lee, a multimillionaire raised on a 1,000-acre cattle farm in Franklin, Tennessee, in the wealthiest county in the state, welcomed billionaire Betsy DeVos, US Secretary of Education, to Nashville on April 1. She warmly embraced Lee’s plan, which is entirely aligned with the Trump administration’s proposal for \$5 billion federal allocation to support such state-run tax “scholarship” programs.

DeVos and Lee made a point of visiting a Nashville charter middle school together. However, the pair failed to reference the recent abrupt collapse of the Nashville charter school New Vision Academy that stranded 158 students mid-year following federal and state investigations over finances.

The sickout is being chiefly organized by a new Facebook group, TN Teachers United, not the Metro Nashville Education Association (MNEA) or the Tennessee Education Association (TEA). Lauren Sorensen, one of three founders of the group, who was the former president of the Knox County Education Association, has made some criticisms of the unions’ policies, saying, “The go-along to get-along approach of the state teachers association, which means working with the enemies of public education, has been a pipe dream for almost a decade, and it’s time for teachers to wake up.”

However, TN Teachers United offers no viable alternative. Like the unions, it is encouraging teachers to place their faith in the Democratic Party, which is just as vicious an enemy of teachers and public education as Trump and the Republicans. While it criticizes the unions for not “fighting hard enough,” it insists that teachers can pressure the unions to change. The group is allied with the *Labor Notes* publication, which insists that teachers and other workers must abide by the authority of the unions, while promoting illusions in supposedly “progressive” section of the Democratic Party.

Sorensen indicated their pro-Democratic Party stance, stating, “All the emailing and phone calls in the world won’t stop politicians bankrolled by billionaires like the Koch brothers and DeVos family from pursuing devastating legislation that hurts our schools, students, and communities.” Such remarks carefully omit the devastating effects of the eight years of defunding education under the Obama administration and the bipartisan policies which have left Tennessee 45th in the nation in school funding. Democrats in California, New York and other states, along with big cities, like Los Angeles and Chicago, have spearheaded the closing of public schools and vast expansion of charters.

Last year, public school teachers asked for a 2.5 percent raise. Officials in Nashville, which is led by Democratic Mayor David Briley, claimed the city couldn’t afford the meager raise. Fearing growing backlash, the Nashville school board’s budget committee recently proposed adding \$77 million for the 2019-2020 education budget, which would include a 10 percent raise for teachers.

“I found a paycheck stub. We don’t get those anymore, but it was from a couple of years ago,” high school teacher Susan Norwood told local media. “My paycheck now—there’s not even a hundred dollars difference. Prices are going up in Nashville, and I really don’t know how we can attract and keep teachers if we don’t pay well.”

City officials have also pitched a real estate gimmick purportedly to make the rising cost of living in the “It” city bearable for underpaid teachers. The deal would turn 11 acres now used to store and repair school buses into a compound of “affordable housing” for school teachers. The city, which has stopped using the

expression “workforce housing,” would swap the land with a developer to build the “affordable” homes for teachers on the 11-acre site.

While teachers continue paying for classroom materials out of their own pockets, in what has been a bipartisan policy, the state and city combined their money to give \$106 million in tax breaks, incentive, job credits and outright cash to Amazon to build a regional hub here.

One of the wealthiest corporations in the world, valued at \$795 billion, and owned by Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world with \$110 billion, recently handed Nashville schools a philanthropic “gift” of \$106,000 to be divided by more than a dozen schools. The “gift,” no doubt a tax write-off, was a mere one-one thousandth of what the city and state handed Amazon.

While a starting teacher would make barely half (\$43,000+) of what it takes to live comfortably (\$84,000+) in Nashville, according to the *Nashville Business Journal*, the city council pitched in almost \$14 million to help build a hotel-guests-only \$90 million water park at the Gaylord Opryland Resort.



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