

US teachers in the Carolinas to hold mass protests on May Day

Shelley Connor
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Teachers in North and South Carolina are planning walkouts and demonstrations on Wednesday, May 1. Like teachers throughout the country and internationally, they are protesting overcrowded and underfunded classrooms, inadequate pay, poor working conditions, and a lack of support staff.

North Carolina teachers are also demanding that the Republican-controlled state legislature expand Medicaid for low-income students. School districts in both states have been forced to close most schools Wednesday because there are not enough substitute teachers to staff classrooms safely.

The simultaneous eruption of teachers struggles in the Carolinas occurs against the backdrop of a continuing wave of teacher strikes and protests around the globe. In 2018, 379,000 teachers went on strike in the US, with educators making up the bulk of the record number of striking workers since 1986. Over 70,000 have gone on strike so far this year, including in West Virginia, Denver, Colorado and Los Angeles, Oakland and Sacramento, California.

In Poland, more than 300,000 teachers carried out the first nationwide strike in 25 years for more than two weeks. In the Netherlands, primary school educators carried out a nationwide strike in March. Teachers in India, across Mexico, in Brazil, Argentina, and in Morocco have struck against the non-payment of wages, in defense of job security and pension rights, and against corporate-backed educational reforms increasing school privatization.

According to press reports at least 31 school districts and four charter schools representing a majority of North Carolina's 1.53 million public school students have canceled classes and thousands of teachers are expected in the state capital of Raleigh on Wednesday. At least two districts in South Carolina--Dorchester 2 and Chester County schools--and Palmetto Scholars Academy charter school in North Charleston have announced they are closing, with more expected today and tomorrow.

Like their counterparts around the US, educators in both North and South Carolina are battling a bipartisan attack on public education. The General Assembly (state legislature) in North Carolina is controlled by the Republicans, but the governor, Roy Cooper, is a Democrat and his party has controlled the governor's office for 21 of the last 25 years. The state is 39th in the nation in per pupil spending.

Last May 16, 20,000 North Carolina teachers rallied to demand better working conditions and pay raises. While the state government claims the raise it granted would bring an average

teacher's salary to \$54,000, this is well below the \$60,000 national average, and 30 percent less than a similarly educated professional in the state.

In addition to improved wages, teachers are demanding the hiring of staff such as counselors, nurses, and librarians, a \$15 wage for all non-teaching staff, a 5 percent cost of living adjustment for retirees, and a reinstatement of retiree health benefits for teachers hired after 2021. They are also seeking an expansion of Medicaid to benefit lower-income children and their families.

One teacher, Sherri Jones Laupert, posted on the North Carolina Teachers United Facebook, "We have multiple students with life-threatening conditions, such as juvenile diabetes, seizure disorders, etc, at our school. There is a nurse who comes through a couple of times per week, but it is their teachers who are expected to be the full-time nurses for those children (while also educating and caring for 22+ other students!)...MAKE NO MISTAKE...there's not enough support staff in every N.C. school! Not by a long shot."

While teachers are fighting for improved funding and classroom conditions, the National Education Association and its state affiliates, which have called the demonstrations, are seeking to subordinate the protests to bankrupt appeals to the Democratic Party, which no less than the Republicans is responsible for attacks on teachers and public education.

The NEA and its counterpart, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have done everything possible to block a nationwide strike of teachers. When they were unable to stop strikes, the unions isolated them and signed agreements that abandoned teachers' demands and were wholly acceptable to the corporate and financial elite, which has systematically starved public education in order to finance ever-larger corporate tax cuts and accelerate its school privatization plans. Although the unions and their supporters declared these strikes as "historic victories," small pay raises have largely been funded through budget cuts or regressive taxes.

At the rally last year, North Carolina Association of Educators President Mark Jewell introduced Democratic Governor Cooper as a "true friend and champion of public education."

Despite the bankruptcy of this perspective, the protests have nevertheless provoked a hysterical response from Republican state legislators. State Senator Ralph Hise denounced the NCAE as a "radical left-wing political organization." The education budget proposal released Friday by the state House of Representatives

would change state law to bar school districts from granting personal leave to teachers on a school day unless they can confirm that a substitute teacher is available. School districts, facing overwhelming support from teachers and parents for last year's mass teacher rally and this week's protest, have cited the lack of substitutes to cancel classes.

A new poll by Raleigh-based Public Policy Polling shows that more than 70 percent of the state's voters—including more than half of Republicans—support teachers taking the day off to share concerns with lawmakers.

Under the senate's education bill, passed earlier this month, teachers would be given \$400 a year for supplies. As many educators have pointed out, this allocation would average about \$2.10 per student for most teachers, many of whom are already paying close to \$1,000 a year for classroom supplies—and provides no new money for classrooms. The money would be deposited annually into an electronic account called "Class Wallet" and teachers would lose bulk buying benefits that schools have. Many teachers have called it a "shell game" and have suggested that politicians are benefiting financially from promoting Class Wallet.

The complaints of South Carolina's educators are similar. Educators have pointed out that they are now making less than they did prior to the recession, and overcrowded classrooms are making it difficult for them to educate their students. The state legislature has not funded schools enough to meet the Base Student Cost formula since 2009. For the 2017-2018 school year, the shortfall came to \$497 million. Neither the Senate nor the House budget proposed for next school year meets the Base Student Cost.

The state has not enforced its own classroom student-to-teacher ratio since 2010, and it has disregarded a South Carolina law that bases teacher salaries on the Southeast regional average of \$51,000. Other states in the region not meeting this average are Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi (the lowest), and West Virginia.

Schools where the average classroom size exceeded 28 students per teacher nearly doubled between 2008 and 2018, going from 60 to 110. Most of these overcrowded classrooms were in high schools, but at least 32 elementary schools have gone over that ratio since 2010.

High school freshmen see the highest percentage of overcrowding, with many teachers being forced to teach 30 students or more at one time. Educators have pointed out that this is a critical period for high school students; many actually make the decision to drop out when they are still freshmen. They have pointed out that they cannot be expected to reach all of these children when they are, as one teacher pointed out to the *Post and Courier*, "packed like sardines" in crumbling classrooms.

Faced with working in such untenable conditions for inadequate pay, South Carolina, like many other states, is hemorrhaging qualified teachers.

Republican Governor Henry McMaster has vowed to "overhaul" the state's education system, and the Senate budget would give all teachers at least a 4 percent raise, with the youngest teachers receiving as much as 10 percent. In a statement read by a spokesperson Governor McMaster denounced the upcoming protests, saying "teachers leaving their classrooms sends the

wrong message to students, unnecessarily disrupts schools, and inconveniences their students' working parents."

The truth is both big business parties are waging a war against students, teachers and public education, while educators in the Carolinas and across the US and the world are fighting to defend the right to high-quality public education for their students.

The single-day protest in South Carolina was called on April 21 by the group SC for ED. This organization has direct ties with the South Carolina Education Association (SCEA), which called and isolated the rally last year and told teachers to "remember in November" and vote for legislators who were "friendly" to education, i.e., the Democrats. Such a perspective is a dead-end for teachers.

That is why the only way for teachers to wage a successful struggle is to build rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the unions and both parties of big business, war, and dictatorship. These committees should fight to unite all teachers and school employees—union and non-union—and link up their struggles with their fellow teachers and workers in all sectors of industry across state lines and internationally.

The full funding of education and secure living standards for teachers is only possible through a frontal assault on the concentrated wealth and power of the financial aristocracy. That is why the struggle to defend and drastically improve public education will require a political fight by the working class to replace capitalism with socialism.

As the fundamental similarities shared by the demands put forward by teachers internationally in their struggles against the ruling class' reactionary attacks on public education are made clear during every strike, it is significant that the teachers strikes in the Carolinas are occurring on May 1, the international day of workers solidarity, which the *World Socialist Web Site* will be commemorating in its online rally on Saturday, May 4.



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