

# Sickout by teachers and school support staff in Nashville, Tennessee

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More than 1,400 teachers and school employees in Nashville, Tennessee, participated in a sick-out Friday to protest the Democratic mayor's school budget, which provided less than half the increase proposed by the school board and no increases in real wages for school employees, who would receive nothing but a three percent cost of living adjustment.

The school board had requested a \$76.7 million increase and teachers demanded a 10 percent pay increase, but Mayor David Briley offered an increase of only \$28.2 million in the budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1.

The *Tennessean* newspaper reported that 18 elementary, middle and high schools reported teacher and staff absences of at least low double digits while McGavock High School reported the largest with 123 teachers and staff reported absent. It was also reported that the sickout may continue today.

Teachers were denied a 2.5 percent raise last year and face increasing class sizes and program cuts. Like their counterparts everywhere, Nashville teachers confront all the problems associated with underfunding and must pay for many supplies out of their own pockets. In a town where the *Nashville Business Journal* (NBJ) reported it takes \$84,000 a year to "live comfortably," teachers start at a little over \$43,000 a year and school aides, "para-professionals," make only about \$20,000 a year.

The sickouts appear to have been initiated by rank-and-file teachers and all of the unions looked to disassociate themselves from the job action. The Associated Press reported that Erick Huth, president of the Metro Nashville Education Association, quickly distanced himself and his "teacher organization" from the sick-out. "This is a wildcat action as far as we're concerned," Huth said.

Lauren Sorensen, an organizer with a new teacher coalition called TN Teachers United, which has close ties to the union, said her group did not organize the sick-out and she didn't know who did. "It seems to be organic. It seems to have kind of come from teachers across Nashville who are tired of putting up with the nonsense," Sorensen said.

A local representative of the National Education Association's (NEA) "Wear Red for Ed" said her group had not sanctioned the action.

Like many other states where teachers have rebelled, it is illegal in Tennessee for teachers to strike.

Well aware of seething anger among educators across the US and, in fact, the world, the *Tennessean* wrote that the Nashville protest "continues a wave of teacher activism that began last year in West Virginia and has spread to other states. Earlier this week, teachers in North Carolina rallied at the Capitol asking for Medicaid expansion, extra pay for master's degrees and a \$15 minimum wage for support staff. Teachers in South Carolina also converged on their statehouse this week, demanding money to reduce classroom sizes, solve a teacher shortage, hire counselors and raise pay. And in Oregon teachers were planning a walkout next week.

"In neighboring Kentucky, Gov. Matt Bevin has been harshly critical of teacher rallies at the Capitol. His administration issued subpoenas seeking the names of teachers who might have used sick days to attend rallies, causing some districts to cancel classes."

While Nashville schools have been starved of funds, politicians from both parties on the city and state level cannot shovel enough money to giant corporations and the wealthy. NBJ recently reported that a newly mandated state report revealed that Tennessee owed to corporations almost \$1 billion in tax credits and other

incentives. The actual amount is about \$974 million, but with the \$102 million pledged to Amazon, the total exceeds one billion dollars.

Prior to the Amazon deal, the Wall Street investment firm of AllianceBernstein will likely receive \$17 million to move its headquarters to Nashville by 2020.

The City Council previously agreed in 2017 to almost \$14 million in tax incentives for a \$90 million hotel-guests only water park at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center, north of downtown.

City officials also simply steal from teachers and students to pay the rich.

A television investigation by CBS affiliate NewsChannel5 revealed that city officials have taken more than \$1 million from school funds to cover its Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program. The city withdrew a total \$1.5 million from the school budget to pay companies even though schools were running out of paper and teachers were being denied a paltry 2.5 percent raise.

While union officials and Democrats are quick to focus all the blame on the right-wing Republican-controlled state legislature, the death from a thousand cuts for schools and free, public education is taking place in Nashville, a “Blue Oasis” i.e., Democratic Party stronghold.

The initiative taken by Nashville teachers is a welcome development. They must depend on themselves to fight for public education and not the Democratic Party or the unions, which have shown their true colors in the betrayal of one strike after another. Nashville teachers will have to link up their struggles with teachers and other workers across the state, the US and beyond, in a common fight to defend the right to high quality public education.



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