

Low-paid South Carolina teachers recruited for factory work

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A May 1 walkout and rally by South Carolina's grossly underpaid teachers necessitated the closure of entire districts. The teachers, frustrated by overcrowded classrooms and pay that has not kept up with living costs, demanded a 10 percent pay raise and a cost-of-living adjustment for retired teachers. Their frustrations have become a boon for employers.

South Carolina's teachers make much less than the national average and they struggle to teach in classrooms where the maximum student-teacher ratio has not been enforced by the state for years. As a result, South Carolina hemorrhages thousands of teachers yearly as educators flee to professions that will allow them to pay their student loans and care for their families.

Those who do not leave the profession are frequently forced to work second, third, even fourth jobs in order to string together a viable income. In April, the *Post and Courier*, a daily newspaper based in Charleston, interviewed some of the state's teachers who must work extra jobs. One man spoke of grading papers during down time at his job as a pedicab operator. Others recounted their experiences in retail, at restaurants, and as tourist guides.

"They want master level teachers but they don't offer to pay for any of the schooling," one woman told the *Post and Courier*. "I'm really passionate about it, and I really enjoy going to school, but now I'm kind of regretting it because I don't know how I'm going to pay my bills."

At least one South Carolina company has begun focusing almost entirely upon hiring teachers to fill warehouse positions. Nephron Pharmaceuticals, located in West Columbia, has begun hiring teachers for tasks such as folding cardboard boxes and labeling syringes. The company recently hired 650 retired and currently

working teachers.

Lou Kennedy, Nephron's CEO, told *Education Week*, "I didn't have any idea that many teachers work second jobs. And a lot of them [are] waiting tables, or working at Starbucks. And there, they're only making \$7 or \$8, or maybe that plus tip. I figured this [hiring strategy] could be a good thing."

Kennedy says she decided to "reach out" to teachers after Nephron, which specializes in small-volume parenteral solutions and inhalation suspensions, experienced a backlog of orders earlier this year. Attracted by a vast pool of "really, really responsible" and severely underpaid labor, Kennedy focused her attention upon hiring not only current teachers, but retired educators as well. South Carolina's retired teachers have not had a significant cost-of-living adjustment to their pensions in over five years, and their income has not kept up with inflation.

Kennedy attracted teachers by paying more than South Carolina's starting salary for educators. While the average starting salary for a teacher in the state is \$33,148, she says that Nephron's \$21 per hour wage "approximates" a \$40,000 prorated salary.

Nephron's strategy has so successfully filled positions that the company has had to temporarily stop accepting applications from teachers. Most of the teachers hired live within a 30-minute drive from Nephron, but there are teachers who drive as much as two hours one way to come to work. Teachers typically work between 15 and 20 hours and make weekly scheduling requests online.

Lou Kennedy tells *Education Week* that while she supports teachers' demands for higher wages, hiring strategies such as Nephron's could be a viable way forward—"one of the best solutions to a complicated problem," as *Education Week* delicately phrases it.

“Until the legislature can find a way to pay [teachers] more, I’m not going to refrain from offering them good money when they need it,” Kennedy says.

South Carolina is not the only state where teachers are forced to work extra jobs to make ends meet. Nationwide, one in five teachers works at least one extra job. This is on top of working 12-16 hours a day during the school year, with as many as half of those hours uncompensated. In addition, during the summer break, they are expected to attend continuing education courses and prepare for the upcoming school year.

Last September, the *New York Times* profiled teachers who work second jobs. The teachers featured in the article universally spoke of exhaustion, frustration and guilt over how thinly they are stretched.

A teacher from South Carolina, who made only \$37,000 annually after five years, recounted being forced to work as a barista in order to support her growing family. “Working a second job has become a necessity, especially because I’m expecting a baby in December. We don’t get paid maternity leave—I can take my sick days. I have 10 days banked and three personal days,” she told reporters.

Teachers have become one of the most obvious examples of how the economic gains made since the Recession of 2008 have gone primarily to the wealthy, leaving workers behind to scramble after crumbs. In 2016, an article in *Chronobiology International* reported that at least 10 percent of American workers must work more than one job. These multiple job holders (MJH), the article’s authors say, are more prone to injury, illness and loss of productivity than single job holders, even when adjusting for actual time spent working.

The study concluded that, while the economic shifts in the United States have demanded that more people work more than one job, “adopting another job is likely to reduce sleep time and may put workers and the public at higher risk” due to fatigue and fragmented focus.

Many politicians criticized South Carolina teachers for walking out of their schoolrooms on May 1, accusing them of thoughtlessly abandoning their charges. Those same politicians, however, have had no problem stuffing 30 or more students into the classroom of a single teacher who is paid so little that he or she must work 20 extra hours a week to afford

basic necessities. These teachers are made responsible for the well-being of hundreds of students while they are mentally and physically exhausted.

Nephron’s hiring scheme is not a solution. Students in South Carolina, as well as the rest of the nation, deserve to be taught by well-rested, well-paid teachers. Teachers must not look to Republicans or Democrats to make this a reality. Along with students, parents and the working class as a whole, they must turn toward an independent political perspective and create rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to fight for their rights.



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