# West Virginia legalizes charter schools

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**29 June 2019**

Despite fierce opposition from teachers and workers in the state, West Virginia Governor Jim Justice signed a sweeping "education reform" bill into law Friday night, opening up the state to charter schools. Late news indicated that he had planned ceremonial bill signing events around the state, including in Kanawha and Jefferson counties for next Monday, but canceled them in fear of rank-and-file teacher protests organized outside of union control.

In the ninth hour leading up to the signing, the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) were hardly organizing resistance. On the contrary, they were penning separate pleas to the billionaire governor to veto the bill, publicly ignoring Justice's central role in pushing through the measure. The stunt echoed their embrace of Justice in 2018 after the unions betrayed the teachers' fight for full funding of the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA).

Educators across the state are livid at these developments and dead-set against school privatization. In this, they are joined by virtually all of the state's workers and youth. The West Virginia Department of Education recently held forums revealing that 88 percent of West Virginians support their public schools and oppose charters.

Last February, teachers voted for strike action across all 55 counties to fight the first incarnation of this omnibus "reform" bill. That version of the bill, like the new state law, tied a 5 percent wage hike for school employees to privatization and charter schools. Workers vociferously denounced the poison pill deal and threatened wildcat action. To forestall a repeat of the previous year's extended strike, the unions conspired to launch a short choreographed two-day walkout, February 19-20.

Meanwhile, the legislature together with the billionaire governor introduced a few concessions to the various revisions including removing school vouchers and Education Savings Accounts. They picked up union support for the House version by removing the requirement for annual dues checkoff re-registration. Still unable to get the deal done, the governor finally scheduled a special summer legislative session ensuring that the school year was over to forestall any possible wildcat action by teachers. Then a Senate supermajority made an end-run around constitutional rules in order to push through the final legislative deal in one day, June 24.

The law, supported by US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and purportedly written by the well-heeled privatization lobbyists of the American Legislative Exchange Council, will allow three charters starting in 2021, with three more in 2023 and three more every three years following. It further stipulates that 90 percent of the per-pupil state aid, as well as federal funding allocations, will follow a student to the charter school.

The effect will be to open the door to the lucrative profit-taking as charters have done nationally while draining vital funding from already extremely impoverished public schools.

After the charter bill passed, West Virginia Education Association President Dale Lee claimed he was "disappointed." Having provided all necessary assistance to the cabal of politicians by blocking a mobilization of the membership, he could hardly feign surprise. In the same vein, Lee announced the union would "look into" a lawsuit and would "remember in November." "The next option we're going to go is the 2020 elections. We want to make sure we elect people who are going to listen to West Virginians," he said in formulaic fashion.

In other words, the unions are following the same back-stabbing playbook as they did in 2018—quashing a struggle and diverting teachers back into the supporting

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the same Democrats and Republicans responsible for the de-funding of public schools and the enrichment of Wall Street—including Democrat-turned-Republican Jim Justice himself. In fact, the unions have fallen in line with Justice at every critical turn, notoriously endorsing as a "victory" the agreement inked by Justice which ended last year's nine-day strike maintaining poverty wages for teachers and without a fix to the PEIA healthcare plan.

Up until now, West Virginia had been one of seven states that had successfully resisted efforts by both Democratic and Republic politicians to introduce the public funding of privately-run and often for-profit schools. Now there are only six left across the US: Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Vermont. Under the administration of former President Obama and his privatization policy Race to the Top, charter school attendance in the US doubled from 3 percent of school children to 6 percent.

Before the foregone vote, the House of Delegates held a brief public hearing seeking to cover their blatant disregard of the population's overwhelming opposition to the bill. For nearly two hours, teachers and public education advocates spoke out, limited to a mere 60 seconds. During her minute, Harrison County teacher Tonya Stuart Rinehart stood silently with a piece of duct tape over her mouth labeled "88%" representing the silencing of the opposition. Others reiterated, "Most people don't want this," called for fixing the Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA) and demanded wrap-around services for their students.

A special ed teacher, Jean, told the legislators, "I'm tired of being told teachers don't like choice. We want a choice, a choice to be able to tell students that have no homes or whose parents are in prison that we can help them. We want wrap-around services. Charter schools don't help that. RIFing [reduction-in-force, or laying off] a teacher with 25 years of experience doesn't help."

Ms. McCoy followed, stating, "Many have spoken to the failure of charter schools. Teachers are up for change, but taking our dollars and letting the greedy corporations get their sticky little fingers on it doesn't fix things. If we want to go the way of New Orleans or the state of Michigan then yes, charter schools, we can follow them right off that cliff." Betty Rivard said succinctly, "This bill is a wolf in sheep's clothing. … This used to be called the people's house; now it's the anti-people's house."

Senate President Mitch Carmichael who has spearheaded the attacks on teachers for the last year and a half called opening up the state to privatization "a monumental achievement." "We're thrilled about it," he added. The measure also expands the National Guard-run Mountaineer ChalleNGe Academy and adds a new site in Fayette County to better funnel young people into the military.

Throughout West Virginia and across the US, there is growing sentiment to put a halt to the subordination of education to the profit interests of Wall Street edubusinesses or what the Democrats and Republicans say is "affordable." Workers know full well there's plenty of money and that the financial elite are cashing in at levels never seen before in human history.

Only the fight to abolish the capitalist profit system and reorganize society based on human need, socialism, can addresses the causes of education de-funding and the growth of poverty and social inequality. We urge educators to build rank-and-file committees in their workplaces and neighborhoods to take forward this fight. Make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.

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