

Strikes get “silent treatment” at NEA convention, as candidates take center stage

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15 July 2019

The National Education Association (NEA) held its annual representative assembly July 4–7 in Houston with barely a mention of the largest teacher strike upsurge in 40 years. Instead, the union hosted a string of Democratic Party presidential candidates and passed a series of reactionary resolutions endorsing identity politics.

NEA President Lily Eskelsen García’s opening address briefly mentioned the strikes, but only as the basis for the Red4Ed election campaign which, she said, brought over 1,000 educators into “local, state and federal offices across the country.” The convention’s theme was gearing up for 2020 elections under the motto of “Our Democracy. Our Responsibility. Our Time!”

One new business initiative (NBI) brought up from the floor referred to the walkouts—that erupted outside of the control of the union to reverse decades of union-backed budget cuts and declining pay scales—and called for establishing a permanent fund to support strikers. Last year, a voluntary fund was established to cover up the fact that the NEA rarely provides strike pay. The fund netted only \$910 in receipts. Registering their disagreement to the NBI from the floor, delegates voiced concern that a permanent fund would “encourage strikes.” Such fears sum up the reactionary anti-worker outlook of the NEA, which had \$406 million in assets and paid García \$414,824 last year. Unsurprisingly, the measure went down to defeat.

The union also rejected a NBI to support the international student-led strike against climate change set for September 20. For her part, García has long made clear her hostility to walkouts. The NEA, alongside the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and public sector unions, made their arguments in *Janus v. AFSCME* telling the Supreme Court that the unions were essential “at the bargaining table in a controlled form,” as opposed to the specter of teachers “in the streets of state capitals.”

The treacherous role of the NEA in isolating and betraying strikes from West Virginia to Washington state over the course of 2018–19 has further discredited the union. Out of a union membership of three million, about 2.29 million are full-time educators or retirees. Approximately 160,000 members have dropped out in the wake of the Supreme Court decision in *Janus* that unions could not compel non-members in a unionized workplace to pay “association fees.” Nearly 90,000 agency fee payers also quit the NEA.

In several states, the Democrats have taken measures to counteract the loss of membership, knowing full well that they can

rely on the union to impose their austerity demands. In Maryland, California and other states new teachers are required to meet with a union representative when they are first hired.

The dues crisis has been compounded by sordid infighting over assets. Last year Clark County, Nevada, teachers disaffiliated with the NEA, removing 20,000 members’ dues from the coffers. With a rash of disaffiliations including in Hawaii, Tennessee, Indiana and Florida, the 2019 NEA bureaucrats cracked down, adopting a bylaw to enable trusteeships and forestall further hemorrhaging of their bank accounts.

High on this year’s convention’s to-do list was a constitutional amendment opening NEA membership to “community allies.” The measure will not only generate income but also allow these new members to donate to the NEA’s Political Action Committee. The threat of cuts to NEA executives’ bank accounts provided sufficient motivation for passage.

In years past, delegates have opposed the measure, complaining that it would put the union “up for sale” to billionaires. “What price do we put on the soul of the NEA?” asked one rhetorically. Of course, that sales transaction was effected long ago. Nevertheless, the influx of big donors will no doubt push the organization even more firmly under the control of the financial elite and privatization forces.

The main event of the convention, aside from subsidizing many delegates’ vacations with generous per diems, was parading Democratic Party candidates in front of the group. These included: Bernie Sanders, Julián Castro, Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O’Rourke, Bill de Blasio, Jay Inslee, Tim Ryan and Kamala Harris.

There was the typical laundry list of applause lines with proposals that none of the candidates expect to enact. Without exception, they were insultingly inadequate to deal with the existential crisis facing public education and the poverty-level wages of the nation’s educators.

- Sanders called for minimum teacher salaries of \$60,000 a year (insufficient in many states with a high cost of living) and all school workers to be raised to \$15 an hour (poverty level wages that qualify many families for federal food subsidies). Similarly, Kamala Harris urged that teacher pay should grow by \$13,000 a year.

- Joe Biden and Tim Ryan suggested \$100 billion to repair schools, even though the Society of Civil Engineers says \$232 billion is needed *each year* to maintain and repair existing school

buildings, reduce the backlog of deferred maintenance and build new schools to meet rising enrollment. O'Rourke, Inslee and Harris said they would address the perpetual short-funding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Biden and Sanders promised they would triple funding for impoverished school districts. In the most modest of proposals, Tim Ryan said he would provide tax credits for the purchase of school supplies, while Klobuchar said she'd vaguely change the estate tax structure to free up money for teacher pay.

- Elizabeth Warren advocated a 2 percent tax on wealthy Americans to fund universal childcare and pre-K while raising wages for early-childhood educators. A much more modest initiative “Invest in Ed,” which teachers sought to place on the ballot in Arizona last year, was nipped in the bud by the state’s supreme court, a clear statement that the wealthy will never permit the slightest encroachment on their stock portfolios to fund public schooling.

In short, the candidates stuck to the standard playbook. They made a few proposals that will never pass and pledge to protect the unions’ “seat at the table” in exchange for hundreds of thousands of dollars of campaign donations and the mobilization of union members for the 2020 elections.

On the national drive to privatize education, the convention voted down a motion that the NEA should only consider endorsing candidates who “publicly state their opposition to all charter school expansion.” The defeated NBI had called for “repudiating the policies of [Obama Education Secretary] Arne Duncan and [Trump Education Secretary] Betsy DeVos.” The striking down of the motion was hailed by the extreme right-wing American Enterprise Institute.

The financial motivation for the NEA is no secret. Only about 11 percent of charter school teachers nationally are unionized. The charter sector doubled under the NEA-endorsed Obama administration, pushing the number of charter school teachers up to approximately 219,000. The unions are aggressively seeking to recruit new dues-payers among this highly exploited layer.

On this hot button issue, Sanders and de Blasio called for an end to “federal funding” of charters; since the vast bulk of education funding comes from the states, this was nearly meaningless. Sanders also called for a “moratorium” on new charters until “their impact” could be studied as if the growth of school privatization via the medium of charter schools has not been well established for over a decade. Meanwhile, de Blasio’s Department of Education gives the charter industry, in apparent violation of privacy regulations, its lists of students’ names and addresses for recruitment purposes.

Kamala Harris was amenable to charters as long as they are “accountable and transparent.” She has received support from education privatizers Eli Broad, Reed Hastings, Laurene Powell Jobs and Michael Bloomberg. No Democratic candidate called for the reconversion of charter schools into public schools.

Apparently, the presence of another Democratic presidential hopeful—Cory Booker—would have been too much even for the NEA. During his tenure as mayor of Newark, New Jersey, Booker handed over the school system to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, the Gates Foundation and other billionaire school

privatizers leaving behind what even the teachers union president acknowledged was a “a crime scene” and “an educational Dresden.”

Delegates passed a milquetoast NBI calling on the government “to address the human-rights violations for which it is responsible in detention centers across the country” and staged a short march for the cameras. No mention was made of the Trump administration’s pending mass round-up of migrants nor, of course, the Democrats’ decision to fund the anti-immigrant witch hunt.

Two NBIs, criticizing Trump’s war threats against Iran and the “bloated Pentagon budget,” were censored by the union’s executives and did not reach the floor for debate. Plenty of time, however, was devoted to pushing identity politics. A program for “people of color” to recruit “students of color” into teaching was adopted along with support for the payment of reparations to descendants of American slaves.

The intertwining of identity politics and US imperialist interests was demonstrated by the selection of Kim Anderson as the first “person of color” for the position of NEA executive director. Formerly she was an executive vice president for Democracy Alliance, the Democratic Party’s “shadow party,” founded by billionaire George Soros, the author of various “color revolution” efforts by US imperialism in Eastern Europe, China and Russia.

Anderson was the legal counsel to Senator Charles Robb, D-VA, known for his close ties to US intelligence agencies. The NEA and the AFT are both members of Education International, a conduit for foreign intelligence operations, the latest incarnation of the long history of pro-imperialist international trade union federations.

The convention underscores the fact that teachers fighting to defend public education require new organizations of struggle that are independent of the NEA and the AFT and guided by a new political perspective against the two corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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