

Little Rock teachers set to strike against privatization and segregation threats

Nancy Hanover
4 November 2016

Nearly 1,600 teachers in Little Rock, Arkansas are set to strike today. It will be the first strike since 1987 and only the second in the state's history.

In an outpouring of overwhelming student support last week, more than 1,231 high school students staged a "sickout" Tuesday, with the protest growing to 3,414 the next day. About 100 high school students marched to the capitol Wednesday and demanded to speak with Governor Asa Hutchinson, who refused to meet with the young people.

In 1957, Little Rock's Central High School was the site of the courageous integration of schools by the "Little Rock Nine," an iconic episode in the struggle against Jim Crow and the fight for free and equal public education for all. Twenty percent of Central's student body participated in the protests last week. Many residents opposing the attacks on schools have emphasized these historic struggles.

Sam Triplett, a senior at Central, told Arkansasonline that the mood around the school has been tense while waiting to see what happens. "Everyone knows the enormity of the situation that's going on right now," Triplett said. "We know it's a David vs. Goliath type of situation. It feels like he's [Hutchinson] just leaving us behind. We're kids. We don't get to vote. This is all we have."

Fourth-grader James Collins, part of the demonstration at the capitol, said, "I wanted to say help our teachers because they're working harder and harder each day because they give us an education on what we need and how we do it," according to ABC7.

On October 10, with a looming end-of-the-month contract expiration, the Arkansas Department of Education voted to strip the Little Rock Education Association (LREA) of its collective bargaining power. Additionally, the district administration staged hiring

events signing up more than 200 possible scabs and offering double the wages of normal substitutes or full-time support staff. They have pledged to keep schools running with or without teachers. Principals are reportedly telling teachers that if they call in sick and are seen on a picket line, they can be terminated.

"One of the things we are going to do is bring in folks from our central office," District Superintendent Mike Poore said. "Everyone has already been assigned spots of where they would go. A second thing is we are going to bring in members of the Department of Education to be a part of the workforce."

For his part, the Republican governor added his determination to eliminate collective bargaining, "There is no other school district in the state of Arkansas that has a negotiated contract with a teachers' union. Little Rock does not need to be the exception."

Little Rock Education Association president Teresa Knapp Gordon temporized saying, "A strike is the last thing we want to do," and said the union would continue to confer regularly with Superintendent Poore and state Education Secretary Johnny Key on learning conditions. However, anger has been growing for years over the steadily worsening conditions of public education and teacher pay. The union has failed to lift a finger for years as LREA members have taken pay and benefit cuts. Educators, parents and students have reached a boiling point.

Consistent with their longstanding policies, neither the National Education Association (NEA) nor the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has proposed linking up the struggle in Little Rock with that of the Chicago teachers or any other section of embattled educators. Throughout the teacher upsurge of the past two years, the unions have single-mindedly isolated struggles, damped down expectations, and rammed

through sellout deals, seeking to prove their reliability to the powers that be and maintain their dues base.

Indicating that the union will provide no strike pay should Little Rock teachers walk out, Gordon instead set up a GoFundMe site relegating teachers' ability to buy food to public charity. This tactic is the national policy of both the NEA and AFT. It is utilized to wear teachers down and preserve the multimillion-dollar assets of the unions and pay their bloated staff. Chicago teachers were the most recent victims.

Little Rock educators are demanding better wages for support staff and "local control" as a means to fight privatization. On September 20, the state education board, largely staffed with Hutchinson appointees, approved a plan that would split the Little Rock School District (LRSD) in two, roughly along racial lines. One half of it—the wealthier part—would return to a locally elected school board. The plan would open the door to widespread privatization through charter schools and de facto segregation.

These moves sparked widespread opposition, with parents protesting under banners, "Separate is still not equal" and "The second Little Rock crisis." Their demand has been "one LRSD." On October 9, more than 2,000 protestors gathered at Central High in a vigil against the state's plan.

With the termination of the old contract, all schools in LRSD are subject to Superintendent Key's waiver policy. This means that schools can require staff to work before and after school (and during lunch) without pay, professional development without pay, mandatory attendance at after-school activities, an extended school day and more.

Last week Key drafted a Memo of Understanding outlining the closing of schools and combining of others under the rubric of "community schools." This measure would leave vacant school buildings that could be snapped up by charters, which, under Arkansas law, have the first right of refusal on empty or underutilized schools. Such schools, according to the Arkansas Times, primarily serve poor children.

Gordon likened the plan to "the next New Orleans," referring to the destruction of the public-school system in that city post-Katrina. Nonetheless, she said, "Community schools have been around for a while in the United States, and if they would allow us a seat at the table, we could work on that together, a

collaborative work to make sure those community schools are the best they can be for our students." But, she complained, "instead of regarding us as educators with knowledge about best practices, they're viewing us as union bosses like Jimmy Hoffa. I mean, come on ... we're being treated like union thugs..."

Gordon makes it clear that the union, as long it collects dues and has a seat at the table, will cooperate with the community school plan. One year ago, the LREA accepted a contract that allowed the state to obliterate due process rights of teachers, capitulating to the demands of Hutchinson and Key. The statute that had been on the books for 30 years protected educators from arbitrary or vindictive firings in so-called "failing schools."

Education policy throughout the state is heavily driven by the pro-privatization Walton family, heirs of the Walmart fortune, and the nation's wealthiest clan. They have presided over a dramatic increase in charter schools in the state, particularly eStem and LISA Academy in Little Rock.

The Walton Family Foundation, based in Bentonville, Arkansas, has spent or earmarked billions in the drive to open education up to for-profit operations. This has been a bipartisan affair, with former Arkansas governor Democrat Bill Clinton opening the door for "education reform" and standardized testing. Hillary Clinton served as head of the Arkansas Education Standards Committee enforcing those attacks. All of such statewide initiatives were later put into overdrive under Obama's Race to the Top and have further escalated under Trump.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact