

Florida teachers to rally January 13 against attacks on public education

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Thousands of Florida teachers are expected to attend a rally in the state capital of Tallahassee on Monday, January 13, to protest years of budget cutting and attacks on public education. The protest is part of the continuing wave of opposition by educators in the US and internationally against austerity, including strikes over the last two years that have involved nearly 700,000 teachers across the US.

While teachers are rallying to express their outrage over low pay and funding cutbacks, the Florida Education Association (FEA), which called the “Fund Our Future” rally, has told teachers they can improve their conditions by lobbying Democratic and Republican state legislators. The rally has been timed for the opening of the legislative session the following day.

But the two corporate-controlled parties are equally responsible for the funding cutbacks. Florida now spends almost \$1,000 less per public-school student, adjusted for inflation, than before the Great Recession. The state ranks 46th in teacher pay and 43rd in per-student spending, compared with other US states.

“I’m tired of living in Amscot [a payday loan company] and begging from family. I haven’t even started to put a dent in my \$73,000 student loan debt,” commented one teacher on social media. Another noted, “I have to move in with my mom in April because I can hardly pay my rent or expenses.” Similarly, another Florida educator stated, “If anything happens to my husband, I will be moving into a box under a bridge.”

The FEA—affiliated with both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—is promoting “Fund Our Future,” the AFT’s national campaign to mobilize teachers behind the Democratic Party nominee for president in 2020. The FEA has sponsored similar activities, including a bus tour last October and November campaigning at 50 school sites from Pensacola to the Florida Keys.

In other words, the union aims to divert teachers behind the big business Democrats in 2020 and prevent the next outbreak of statewide teacher walkouts from hitting the Sunshine State. Teachers around the state have held many localized protests during the past two years and demanded strike action, but the union has done everything in its power to keep teachers on the job, justifying it by citing the undemocratic ban on teacher strikes in the state.

Headlining the January 13 event will be AFT President Randi Weingarten and NEA President Lily Garcia. The two highly paid union executives (both approximately \$500,000/year) have spent the last two years isolating and squashing teachers’ struggles from West Virginia to Chicago, even as state legislatures and local administrations—Republican and Democrat alike—have rebuffed the demands of strikers and mass rallies. School closures, poverty pay and overstuffed classrooms often staffed with substitutes have continued unabated.

It is particularly notable that Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey will also address the Florida rally. In league with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, Sharkey shut down the powerful strike of 32,000 Chicago teachers last October, forcing through a rotten sellout that addressed none of the burning concerns of teachers. The 11-day strike ended with a deal that paved the way for mass school closures, increased teachers’ health care costs and maintained bloated class sizes.

The attacks on public education in Chicago, as well as in Los Angeles and other cities across the US, have been spearheaded by the Democrats, while the role of the unions has been to block the demands of educators for nationally coordinated strike action or mobilizing the working class more generally behind the defense of schools. The experience of teachers across the globe has revealed that only a political movement, independent of all capitalist parties and committed to a socialist program, can mount the type of frontal attack on the entrenched

wealth of the elite necessary to fund essential services like education.

Florida became ground zero for school privatization under former governor Republican Jeb Bush. In 2016, the most recent year for which there is data, Florida drained \$969.6 million from education spending into various privatization schemes: education savings accounts, vouchers and tax credit programs. As part of former Democratic President Barack Obama's evisceration of education spending nationally, federal education funding in Florida fell by \$870 million between 2010 and 2012. State and local funding of Florida schools were also cut by a whopping 23 percent between 2008 and 2017, the worst such drop in the nation. Teacher pay fell by nearly 6 percent.

Poverty pay has led, as it has from coast to coast, to young people fleeing the teaching profession and a state of crisis in the classroom. The phenomenon has been called a "silent strike." According to the *Orlando Sentinel*, about 40 percent of new Florida teachers leave within the first five years of starting. At the beginning of this school year, 3,500 classrooms had no permanent teachers, meaning some 300,000 students in the state were receiving substandard instruction.

Facing growing opposition to the attacks on public schools and the state's standardized test-based school accountability system, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has now proposed spending an additional \$1 billion on teacher raises, boosting starting pay to \$47,500 and providing a meager bump of \$50 to the base student allocation.

This proposal has received widespread push-back within the state Republican party and is widely viewed as a publicity stunt. Educators on social media dismissed its chances: "I won't hold my breath. [Even] if he pulls this off for everyone, insurance rates that we pay will skyrocket so that we won't see it anyway." Another decried: "They don't want to pay teachers; we are second-class citizens making just above minimum wage unless we are willing to strike and walk out for a duration that will speak volumes to them [about] how serious we are."

However, while promoting the pro-Democratic Party "Fund Our Future" campaign, the FEA has also charitably described the governor's plan "a start," but "not a cure." DeSantis, whose wife started a charter school, is a right-wing Trump supporter and a recipient of substantial financial largess from US Education Secretary (and privatizer-in-chief) Betsy DeVos. Since taking the governor's chair, he has doubled down on the state's

privatization schemes through a "Schools of Hope" program to fund charters located near "struggling" public schools.

What is required to meet the demands of teachers for quality pay and benefits and the right to high-quality public education for all students? To secure these rights means a political struggle, mobilizing the entire working class in the fight for a vast redistribution of wealth and an end to the subordination of every social right to the endless accumulation of private profit.

While they claim there is no money for public education, the Democrats have just joined the Republicans in authorizing Trump's record \$738 billion Pentagon budget. If this money were used for improving public education instead of squandering on wars for profit, it would double the amount of yearly spending for schools at the federal, state and local level.

The teacher unions, from the FEA to the AFT, are absolutely opposed to a real fight. For educators to move forward, they must break out of the stranglehold of these pro-capitalist and thoroughly corrupt organizations. The Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers to build rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood to organize a fight for what teachers, students, and parents truly need, not what the politicians claim is affordable.

Rank-and-file committees of educators must link up their struggle with those of all sections of workers against declining wages, social inequality, attacks on immigrant workers and youth, and the dangers of war and dictatorship. An industrial counter-offensive by the working class must be combined with the building of a powerful political movement aimed at fighting for a workers government and socialism.

We urge teachers to subscribe to the WSWS Teacher Newsletter, which will do everything possible to provide Florida teachers with a voice and perspective for this struggle, assist them in building rank-and-file committees, and link up their fight with other sections of the working class.



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