

Thousands of Florida educators rally to demand increase in pay and school spending

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On Monday, thousands of teachers and their supporters from across the US state of Florida rallied in front of the Old Capitol Building in Tallahassee to demand better pay and school funding. Defying threats of firings and massive fines for engaging in what some officials called an illegal strike, teachers rode chartered buses and car-pooled from as far away as Miami, nearly 500 miles from the state capital.

As the new year begins, Florida teachers are joining a nationwide and international battle of teachers to defend the right to a living wage and high-quality education for all students. Over the last two years, more than 700,000 teachers and school employees in the US have been involved in strikes and protests in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, Indiana and other states along with major cities like Los Angeles, Oakland and Chicago. This has been part of an international trend, which includes strikes by educators in France, the Netherlands, Poland, Croatia, India, Australia and many other countries.

Teachers in Tallahassee expressed their determination to fight Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, a backer of Trump and his right-wing education secretary Betsy DeVos, who oversees the largest school voucher program in the US, aimed at diverting public funds to private and for-profit schools, along with standardized testing beginning in kindergarten.

However, the Florida Education Association (FEA), which called the rally, and the national leaders of the teachers unions who spoke sought to divert teachers down the dead end path of appealing to Democratic and Republican state legislators and electing a Democratic president in 2020, although both parties are responsible for decades of school funding cuts and privatization schemes.

Florida has served as ground zero for the attack on public education for the last 20 years, beginning under former Republican Governor Jeb Bush. Each year, nearly a billion dollars are drained from education spending to be spent on various privatization schemes, from education spending accounts to vouchers and tax credit programs.

At the same time, federal education spending fell in Florida by nearly a billion dollars between 2010 and 2012 under the direction of former Democratic President Barack Obama, and state and local funding of Florida schools was cut by 23

percent. 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.

Florida is currently facing a teacher shortage, especially among younger teachers who are fleeing the profession, largely due to low pay, which dropped by nearly six percent between 2008 and 2017, and lack of funding.

Mary, a veteran teacher of 27 years who teaches English to middle school students in Marion County, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that despite being employed full-time for decades, she is still paying off student loan debt for her Master's degree.

"A big reason is that they switched to a performance pay system and abandoned their step pay system, which means that I lose on average about \$350 to \$400 every paycheck. Whatever measly funds are raised get allocated to building funds or other aspects of education. None of it goes to salaries." On the issue of the privatization of education, Mary insisted that taxes are meant for public schools and should not be used to subsidize private and for-profit schools.

Danielle, Deanna and Kristi, three teachers who work in Broward County, talked to WSWs reporters about their class sizes and how school administrators wiggle around the numbers by putting students on computers.

Deanna, who has been teaching for 25 years, said that moving to a performance-based pay scale means that she earns \$17,000 less each year than she should have been receiving on Florida's old step-based system. "I have to tutor on the side, and after 25 years I shouldn't be struggling with a Master's degree." The three teachers recalled a year when they actually took a pay decrease because they were forced to put 3 percent of their pay into their retirement and that they received no raises for the previous years before that. "Teachers should at least get raises that meet the cost of living."

Rucsandra, who teaches freshman high school English in Orange County, approached WSWs reporters to talk about a personal experiment she conducted this school year. She decided to start marking down all of the hours she spent doing her job, including arriving to work early, leaving late, and having to work on the weekends. "I found that I was working

about 60 hours a week on average, 20 of which were not paid. I had to stop recording after the third week because it was so overwhelming. A lot of young teachers come into the profession because they want to change the world, but then they find that they have to teach to the tests instead. On top of that, they are not getting fairly paid, so they quit.”

Rucsandra told WSWs reporters that she is able to afford a studio apartment on her own but that there is no way she can upgrade to anything more than that on her current salary.

Tonia, a school bus driver in Hillsborough County, said that even after 20 years of employment, her pay is terrible. “I started back in 2000, making about \$10 per hour, and now I only make about \$13. Florida rent is killing us, and after money for insurance benefits and union dues is taken out, I often only get a biweekly paycheck of about \$400. How is someone supposed to live on \$1,100 a month?” Tonia explained that many bus drivers work two jobs, and that she personally had to leave her apartment and move in with a family member last August to survive.

Marlene, a retired custodial worker who worked in Duval County for 30 years, said she noticed a huge problem when the schools decided to privatize custodial work in her county. “All of the schools started to be under-cleaned because all of the privately-run companies were under-bidding to get lucrative contracts. All of the custodial workers who were employed less than five years were forced to work for the private companies, which meant lost benefits and money, no raises, and increases in the cost of benefits.” She said most custodians couldn’t even afford insurance because the cost was too high.

A group of teachers from Polk County, who asked not to be photographed or named, told WSWs reporters that they received emails Friday night from the Department of Education that they could each be fired or fined \$20,000 for attending the Monday demonstration. Despite the threats between 1,300 and 1,600 teachers in the county called in sick.

Speakers at the rally included American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten and National Education Association (NEA) President Lily Eskelsen García who have spent the last two years isolating each teacher strike and seeking to prevent the wave of struggles from coalescing into a nationwide walkout to defend public education. Also present was Jesse Sharkey, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union, a leader of the now defunct International Socialist Organization who presided over the sellout of the 11-day strike last October that paved the way for the city’s Democratic mayor to shut more schools.

Democratic Party stalwart Al Sharpton was also there, and statements of support were sent by several potential Democratic Party presidential candidates, including Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. In his statement the Vermont senator and self-proclaimed “democratic socialist” said, if elected, he would “establish a national minimum salary of \$60,000 for educators... combat privatization by eliminating school voucher programs

and placing a moratorium on the expansion of charter schools... put an end to high-stakes testing once and for all.”

The fact is, even if a President Sanders proposed these modest reforms, they would never be passed and would be opposed by the vast majority of his own Democratic Party, which, since the Clintons in the 1990s, has championed “school choice,” i.e., the diversion of public funding to charter and private schools. Under Obama, the largest expansion of charter schools in US history took place and the president used his infamous “Race to the Top” federal funding program to push for punitive testing and teacher accountability schemes and merit pay.

In opposition to the bipartisan assault on public education, backed by the trade unions, supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* distributed thousands of newsletters advancing a strategy to fight. This includes the building of rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood, independent of the unions, to prepare an industrial and political struggle to defend the right to high-quality public education.

This social right will not be won through tinkering with the capitalist system but only through a political struggle by the working class for genuine socialist demands, including the expropriation of the private fortunes of the super-rich, the transformation of the giant banks and corporations into publicly owned enterprises, and the redirection of the hundreds of billions now squandered on war and the attack on immigrants for social needs.

We urge teachers in Florida and around the country to subscribe to the WSWs Teacher Newsletter, which will do everything possible to provide 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 in the US and internationally.



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