

Salt Lake City teachers stage one-day walkout

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Last Friday, February 28, teachers in Salt Lake City, Utah, staged a one-day walkout and marched at the state capitol to demand improved schooling conditions. The half-day rally at the capitol was called by the Salt Lake Education Association (SLEA), part of the National Education Association, to vent rank-and-file anger over the dismal lack of funding for the state's public educational system.

Teachers, students, and families of students gathered at the capitol, where SLEA speakers made timid appeals for funding and described deteriorating conditions in Salt Lake's public schools. The crowd was much larger than the union had anticipated.

Utah, where per pupil spending is \$6,953 a year, ranks last in student spending among all the 50 states. Because of this the Salt Lake City School District (SLCSD) is facing declining enrollment, which has been used to justify further cuts to faculty and staff. Nearly 59 percent of the district's students qualify for free or reduced-price school breakfast and lunch. For children in Utah ages 11 to 17, suicide is the leading cause of death.

While the state is governed by a Republican governor and Republican-controlled legislature, Salt Lake City, the state's capital, along with school board, is dominated by Democrats.

The SLEA is demanding the hiring of more mental health professionals and asking for money to hire more temporary workers—in other words, to expand the pool of super-exploited, low-paid educators. It is seeking neither raises for full-time teachers nor an expansion of full-time positions.

The walkout follows a January school board meeting at which the superintendent of the Salt Lake City schools, Lexi Cunningham, announced she would retire at the end of the school year, leaving a job that pays \$208,000 annually. Teachers, on average, receive between \$47,741 and \$63,128 a year.

According to a report aired by the local television station *KSL* in December 2019, when taking into consideration the costs associated with housing, food, transportation, health care and taxes, a family of four living in Salt Lake County would need more than \$81,000 per year to survive. This breaks down to nearly \$6,800 per month.

Salt Lake City's Democratic administration has used the city's abundance of low-paid workers and offers of tax breaks to court Amazon, UPS and FedEx, which have all built warehouses in the area in the past two year. Amazon was recently rewarded with a \$5.6 million tax cut for its SLC-1 facility.

FedEx, which has been laying off workers around the country while speeding up production to match Amazon, recently gave a paltry 250 coats to elementary school students in the Salt Lake District. Citing the fact that a quarter of families in the city live below the poverty line, KUTV2 cited a FedEx sales manager who stated, "We had an option of three schools we could [choose] but this was the school with the best test grades [...] so we wanted to make sure to reward them."

According to an SLCSD high school support worker who spoke with the *WSWS*, there are many students who compromise their education in order to assist with family responsibilities or bring in household income. "One student I help is afraid that his entire family will be stuck working at Walmart. His brother graduated high school but couldn't apply for college, and now works at Walmart with their mother. They're both frustrated and it makes it hard for him to complete schoolwork at home or focus at school," the worker said.

"Other students skip school to provide daycare for younger siblings while their parents work. We have military recruiters come around often—Utah has Hill Airforce Base—and a lot of kids commit to the military because it might help them afford college."

Students are also subject to right-wing, antidemocratic policies imposed on Utah's curriculum. The Utah State core standards for history classes expect students to "engage in dialogue regarding American exceptionalism, in the sense of the special character of the United States as a uniquely free nation based on democratic ideals and personal liberty."

"Teachers and support staff are advised against discussing anything that could be construed as a political topic with students," the school support worker added. "I was advised to be careful about discussing evolution with a student who asked me about creationism, and in trainings [professional development] teachers are warned not to engage or support a student who comes out to them regarding their sexuality."

The issues faced by the teachers in Salt Lake City are the same as those confronted by teachers across the US and internationally. Over the past two years, anger over low pay and inadequate funding have provoked strikes on six continents. In Ontario, Canada, on February 21 two hundred thousand educators staged a one-day strike in defense of public schools. There is an ongoing wildcat strike of graduate students and teaching assistants at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where educators are demanding a cost of living increase in area of the country with some of the most expensive housing.



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