

Alabama budget throws crumbs to teachers

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The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will hold its next meeting on Sunday, April 24 at 2 PM CDT, 3 PM EDT. “For working class unity against war and inflation: a discussion with Southern workers and youth,” sign up here.

Last week, the Alabama legislature approved a record \$8.26 billion education budget with the largest teacher pay raises since the mid-1980s. The raises are an attempt to staunch the collapse of public education in the state and slow the mass exodus of chronically underpaid teachers.

The *New York Times*, covering this and similar meager increases nationally, voiced the hope that the small pay bumps could “assuage teachers over labor concerns, with teachers having gone on strike in cities such as Sacramento and Minneapolis.” The Democratic Party mouthpiece expressed the ruling elite’s deep anxiety over the growing movement of workers against poverty pay levels and social inequality being exacerbated by the pandemic and the US proxy war in the Ukraine.

Alabama’s Education Trust Fund (ETF) budget includes an initial increase for fiscal year 2023 ranging from 4 percent for those with fewer than 9 years of experience, up to 21 percent for those with 35 years’ experience. Thereafter, there will be yearly step increases of 1 percent for all teachers, stopping after 35 years of teaching. Republican Governor Kay Ivey, who faces multiple opponents in the primary election this May, is expected to sign the bill into law shortly.

The response on social media was appropriately angry. “To truly impact [retention] teachers need 25-30% pay raises. We have been underpaid for decades,” said one. Another added, “too little, too late.”

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, commenting on the recently announced pay increases around the country told the *New York Times*, “Let me just say this: It’s never too late.” She continued, “People don’t go into teaching to become rich, but they should be able to raise their kids on a decent salary.” Despite the disclaimer, Weingarten, netting more than \$500,000 annually, apparently chose the first reason.

For its part, the Alabama Education Association likewise gushed its approval of measures. “The No. 1 sentiment has been: It’s about time, and it’s very much appreciated,” said Amy Marlowe, the association’s executive director. Inadvertently pointing to the union’s failure to fight for decent

wages over decades, she noted it is the first time teachers in Alabama have seen a pay raise of this scale since 1983. Over the last two decades, the legislature has approved cost-of-living raises, ranging from 2 to 7 percent, only eight times.

The result has been that Alabama teachers subsist on poverty wages. The state is rated 35th out of 50 states in salaries, with teachers receiving \$10,000 a year less than their colleagues in other states on average. The current legislation utterly fails to make up for these decades of stagnating wages.

For most teachers the initial, larger raise will not even keep up with rising prices in 2022. Teachers rightly noted on social media, we are “basically breaking even ... inflation and cost of living.” Another added, “What a joke!! 1% pay raise ... you still go in the hole every year when insurance goes up,” added another.

Teachers also questioned whether the money would even make its way into teachers’ paychecks, or whether it would be whittled down after it passes through the hands of local school boards and superintendents.

According to the March 2022 Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers Report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, inflation has hit the South harder than other areas of the country. The rise in inflation over the last year averages a staggering 9 percent across the region, placing it higher than the national average of 8.5 percent. In other words, teachers—like workers across the US—will struggle to eat and put gas in their cars.

The latest ETF follows last year’s initiative, TEAMS (Teacher Excellence and Accountability for Mathematics and Science), which sought to take advantage of the difficult straits of educators by bribing them to give up their rights. Teachers in the program signed one- or three-year contracts to earn up to \$20,000 more per year but lose their continuing service, or tenure, status.

To give a sense of the terrible inadequacy of these raises (called by the *New York Times* “good news” and “significant”), the average Alabama teacher, with a Master’s degree and 11 years of experience, will receive only a 7 percent raise, less than the rate of inflation. That is the princely sum of \$4,015, pre-tax. An Alabama teacher with a Bachelor’s degree would have to be in the 20th year of teaching to see a raise of over \$5,000 to just meet the estimated costs in rising food, fuel and basic needs which financial analysts expect to hit in 2022.

This is not to mention the fact that many of these educators, after years of training, are struggling with student loan debt incurred for additional degrees.

The AEA's endorsement of the Alabama budget is just its most recent betrayal of the interests of teachers. The union has become notorious among teachers in the state for its refusal to fight against the deadly reopening of schools throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the height of the Omicron surge, when schools across Alabama were reopening without even the most minimal mitigation measures in place, AEA Representative Anna Bern said that the organization was determined to "keep schools open" and would focus on "advocating" for mask mandates.

The pandemic has exacerbated the grave shortage of educators nationally, for good reason, as school workers have been at the front lines of demands by big business politicians that workers return to unsafe job sites, no matter how many people get sick or die.

Though no official tally has been published, an unofficial Twitter tracker has documented at least 22 educator deaths in Alabama since the start of the 2021-2022 school year. In September 2021, before the height of the Delta and Omicron waves, the Birmingham City Schools District reported eight staff members and one student had died of COVID-19. During the winter of 2020-2021, eight educators died in Montgomery.

As for the impact of the pandemic on children, the state stopped publicly reporting pediatric COVID-19 deaths in July of 2021, before the Delta and Omicron waves ripped through the US and caused record infections, hospitalizations and deaths among children nationwide.

A survey conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) in January found that 55 percent of its members intended to leave teaching sooner than planned "because of the pandemic," up from 37 percent in August 2021. A staggering 90 percent said burnout was a serious problem. Already there are 567,000 fewer educators in public schools than before the start of the pandemic, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. As the same time the ratio of new hires to job openings reached the record low of .57 in January.

Before the pandemic, the Alabama Teacher Shortage Task Force reported in 2019 on the serious shortage within the state. Thirty percent of all Alabama classrooms were being taught by teachers outside their field of expertise, and 1,700 secondary teachers were teaching with emergency certification or out of field. From 2010 to 2019, students entering teaching education programs dropped by 40 percent. Only 4 percent of high school juniors taking the college admissions ACT indicated they would consider a teaching career, down from 12 percent in 2015.

Last year, over 3,500 teachers and school staff retired after the 2020-2021 school year, the most in a decade. A survey conducted by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education in May-June 2021 among K-12 public school educators, including

both teachers and other school staff, found that 38 percent of respondents indicated they planned to leave within five years. An additional 17 percent considered leaving within five years.

Of those with plans to leave within five years, 47 percent cited burnout as a contributing factor, 41 percent cited both lack of respect at their job and low salary. Even among respondents with no plans to leave, 44 percent said burnout was an issue, and 42 percent said their salary was too low.

The consensus was that in addition to needing significant pay increases above what was approved, teachers are also quitting due to being overburdened by staff shortages, onerous administrative pressures, standardized testing requirements, and hostile work environments. As one teacher remarked, "The education system is broken and it's going to take more than money to fix it."

Desperate temporizing measures by state officials in the face of growing class struggles, propelled by the rising cost of living due to the ongoing pandemic and compounded by the outbreak of war in Ukraine, are not unique to Alabama. In Louisiana, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education passed a budget which included a \$1,500 raise for certified teachers. Tennessee Governor Bill Lee has also proposed a similar increase of \$1,550 for teachers in the next budget. This translates to an increase of only \$125 and \$129 a month.

In Mississippi, which ranks last in the NEA's estimates of average teacher salary nationally, the legislature recently passed the largest teacher pay raise in the state's history. Even this only amounts to an average raise of \$5,140 in the first year, followed by annual step increases of only \$400, with \$1,200 to \$1,350 increases every five years.

Meanwhile, the ruling elites, represented by both capitalist parties, have spared no expense in their reckless drive to war, with the swift passage of the Biden administration's record \$800 billion military budget.

There is plenty of money to fully fund free, high-quality education for all students, but this requires a vast redistribution of resources away from the war machine and the super wealthy. To mobilize a fight for their demands requires that teachers and school workers organize themselves independently of the official trade unions and associations, which are tied hand and foot to the politicians and school officials that have carried out continuous attacks against public education.

The Southern Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to unite the working class across the region, in solidarity with committees across the US and internationally, to wage a struggle against the pandemic, austerity and the threat of war. Contact us to learn how you can join the fight!



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