

DeSantis-backed school boards begin firing superintendents and enacting reactionary measures across Florida

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Florida Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, already on a fascistic crusade against public education, has made significant inroads into securing control over public schools through the local school boards. Twenty-five out of thirty candidates he endorsed in nominally non-partisan elections won, securing conservative majorities in at least seven districts, including Miami-Dade, the largest in Florida and fourth largest in the United States.

Immediately, two school boards fired the district superintendents, others implemented reactionary measures including anti-transgender regulations, while one announced plans to enforce law-and-order in the schools. In Broward County, the outgoing DeSantis-appointed school board fired the superintendent in its last meeting. These developments signify a major escalation in the far-right's attack against public education, with Florida serving as the initial battle ground for what is planned across the United States.

Earlier this year, DeSantis oversaw passage of a series of reactionary laws against public education and the democratic rights of teachers and students. These include the "Stop WOKE Act," aimed at suppressing the teaching of historical movements related to the fight for democratic rights and social equality; the "Parental Rights in Education" bill that bans classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender in primary schools; and the anti-socialist "Victims of Communism Day" bill that will require high school government courses to provide instruction on "communist dictators and how the victims of communism suffered under these regimes" as well as require schools to "suitably observe and honor" the designated state holiday.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, DeSantis has been a leading figure in the fascist campaign to impose "herd immunity" upon the population, including through the persecution of data scientist and whistle-blower Rebekah Jones and the attempt to withhold funding from school districts that adopted mask mandates. The firing of the three superintendents in Broward, Brevard and Sarasota counties appears to be retribution for those districts adopting mask mandates in defiance of DeSantis's ban in 2021.

In Broward County, the sixth largest school district in the US, five board members appointed by DeSantis abruptly introduced and passed a motion to fire Superintendent Vickie Cartwright without cause in their last scheduled meeting before being replaced

by elected members. Cartwright was interim leader of the district in August 2021 when Broward's school board voted 8-1 in August 2021 to maintain a district-wide mask mandate.

In Brevard County, Superintendent Mark Mullins was forced to resign when it became clear the school board would fire him following the election of conservative members Gene Trent and Megan Wright, the latter endorsed by DeSantis. Wright suddenly proposed terminating Mullins's contract without prior warning and was supported by Trent and board chairman Matt Susin.

The new board also moved quickly to undo a non-discrimination policy for LGBTQ students adopted in 2016, which included providing bathroom accommodations for transgender students. *Florida Today* reported that the board ordered Mullins to begin segregating bathrooms and locker rooms according to biological sex, citing a recently passed rule by the State Board of Education requiring districts to notify parents if schools allowed access to these facilities on any basis other than "biological sex at birth." Susin claimed that sending letters to parents to notify them of the inclusive policy would have been cost-prohibitive.

In a sinister warning of what the board has in store for the district, Susin later held a press conference in front of the local county jail alongside Sheriff Wayne Ivey and State Attorney Phil Archer, announcing plans to implement "the most prolific school discipline policy this district has ever had."

His remarks were followed by the sheriff who warned that "disruptive" students and classroom "clowns" would soon face harsh consequences and that the sheriff's department would be their "worst nightmare." Currently, Ivey complained, students "know they're not going to be given after-school detention, they're not going to be suspended, they're not going to be expelled, or like in the old days, they're not going to have the cheeks of their ass torn off for not doing right in class." He continued, "It's a brand new day. We have a school board that stands behind this and we have the teachers unions that stand behind it."

The involvement of powerful far-right forces in the school board elections is made clearest in Sarasota County. Two DeSantis-backed candidates won first-time election and another, board chair Bridget Ziegler, won reelection, securing a 4-1 conservative majority. The board quickly moved to terminate Superintendent Brennan Asplen with little explanation despite an outpouring of

public support on his behalf. Asplen, a self-avowed conservative Republican, was accused by a couple of public speakers of “wokeism” and “bowing to LGBT groups.” The board cited, moreover, complaints against his enforcement of a temporary mask mandate in 2021.

Ziegler is a founding member of the far-right group Moms for Liberty, a highly connected organization founded in 2021 to fight COVID-19 mitigations in schools, police classroom curricula, terrorize teachers and discriminate against LGBTQ youth, all under the guise of “parental rights.” Moreover, she is the wife of Christian Ziegler, Sarasota County Commissioner and vice-chairman of the Florida Republican Party. She as well as board members Robyn Marinelli and Karen Rose are personally connected to the fascist militia the Proud Boys. Following their victories, Marinelli and Ziegler were photographed at a celebration event with local Proud Boys members James Hoel and Nick Radovich, one of whom was flashing an “OK” sign, which has been adopted as a white power gesture.

Moms for Liberty, which donated to dozens of school board candidates across Florida and endorsed candidates across the US, presents itself as a “grassroots” organization but is in fact a Trojan horse for powerful business and fascist interests. As Media Matters noted in its investigation into the group, despite only being formed in 2021, it immediately garnered support from far-right media personalities including Rush Limbaugh, Megyn Kelly, Steve Bannon and others. The group’s national PAC received its first major contribution of \$50,000 from Julie Fancelli, heiress of the Publix Super Markets family and one of the principal financial and organizational supporters of the “Stop the Steal” rally that preceded the fascist coup attempt of January 6.

Moms for Liberty is also connected to powerful school privatization forces including billionaire former US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who spoke at the group’s inaugural national summit this summer, the Council for National Policy and the Heritage Foundation. These connections are particularly significant and highlight the fundamental agenda of the far-right to destroy public education and convert schools into a trillion dollar for-profit market. This goal has the unanimous support of the capitalist class, including its representatives in the Democratic Party and the bureaucratic apparatus inside the trade unions.

The response of the trade unions bureaucrats to the firing spree has been one of total complicity. The local union in Sarasota merely held a rally to protest Asplen’s firing, while the union in Brevard tacitly welcomed Mullin’s firing, citing the lack of progress in addressing behavior issues inside classrooms. Indeed, the law-and-order press conference also featured Dolores Varney, the business representative from the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) Local 1010 whose members include school bus drivers and other school staff. At the state level, Florida Education Association President Andrew Sparr told Politico that “union leaders are staying optimistic that these board members will be focused on supporting educators and staff in local schools.”

At the national level, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten is no stranger to the far right either. In 2021, she held a town hall event with Open Schools USA and Great

Barrington Declaration author Jay Bhattacharya, in order to downplay the risks posed by COVID-19 to children and to undermine the mass movement by rank-and-file teachers to demand remote learning. Recently, she traveled to Ukraine to promote Washington’s imperialist proxy-war against Russia, during which she deliberately covered up the role of Ukrainian fascists in the Holocaust.

Above all, it is the Democratic Party that has played the leading role in strengthening the far right and enabling the fascistic transformation of the Republican Party. In Florida specifically, Democratic legislators unanimously supported DeSantis’s “Victims of Communism Day” bill as well as the anti-teacher bill which grants five-year teaching certificates to military veterans who do not possess a college degree nor any teacher training. Following Hurricane Ian, which killed 110 people, President Joe Biden bestowed praise upon DeSantis, who he said had done a “remarkable” job.

Following Trump’s fascist coup attempt of January 6, Biden and the Democrats gave Trump and his co-conspirators cover, refusing to prosecute them and disguising the ongoing threats of dictatorship. Since his inauguration, Biden has insisted on “bipartisanship” and a “strong Republican Party” in order to secure support for the war against Russia and to crush the growing movement of the working class against the two-party system and capitalism itself. The most recent and flagrant example of this is the rapid bipartisan passage of legislation to dictatorially impose a contract on 115,000 rail workers and prevent a national rail strike.

The developments in Florida are just the opening stage in the escalating war against public education taking place across the United States. Moms for Liberty, just one of multiple such groups, has endorsed winning school board candidates throughout the country, including in New York, Wisconsin, Virginia and North Carolina. In Berkeley County, South Carolina, newly elected far-right board members also fired the superintendent, banned “critical race theory” and initiated a committee to censor “inappropriate” books.

The fact is that teachers are a component part of the working class, a far more powerful social force than the capitalist class, which is whipping up fascist filth as a defense against the growing movement of workers in every industry. However, they are shackled by the trade unions that claim to represent them, as well lingering illusions in the Democratic Party, which is no less hostile to their democratic rights and social interests than the Republicans.

The defense of democratic rights and public education cannot be left in the hands of the unions but must be wrested from them through the building of independent, militant rank-and-file committees in every district that will connect teachers with workers in other sectors throughout the US and internationally and unite them on the basis of a socialist program.



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