

Hundreds of Houston teachers and students protest against right-wing district takeover

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On October 20, hundreds of Houston teachers, students, parents, and supporters participated in a demonstration against changes enacted by state-appointed superintendent Mike Miles. The march was organized by the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT), which is seeking to let off steam among increasingly radicalized educators, students and their families.

Houston Independent School District was taken over by the state of Texas earlier this year, due to low performance at one high school. In June, state Education Commissioner Mike Morath ordered the replacement of the locally elected Board of Trustees with an appointed board, and he replaced the district's superintendent with Miles. Under Texas law, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), which oversees approximately 1,200 school districts and charter schools, can intervene in a school district if schools are academically underperforming. Schools' grades are based on a series of tests, known as the STAAR tests, taken by students each year.

Since assuming the position of superintendent, Miles has initiated numerous changes that have drastically worsened conditions in the district, the largest in Texas and eighth-largest in the US which employs nearly 11,000 teachers who serve roughly 195,000 students. Among the changes are the cutting of over 2,300 positions in the district, changes in the curriculum, and a proposal to base the pay of all teachers on test scores.

Miles has implemented a system known as the New Education System (NES), initially at 29 campuses, but which will eventually be expanded to all 274 schools in the district. All principals, teachers, counselors and specialists were required to reapply for their positions. Features of the NES include premade lesson plans and cameras in all classrooms. The schools that

are implementing it are experiencing a loss of autonomy.

Teachers' existing salary structure will be eliminated by the 2025-26 school year. Instead of being paid based on experience, teachers will be paid based on their "effectiveness." Miles' plan places teachers onto a curve, in which 20 percent are at the top levels, 40 percent are rated as "proficient" and the remaining 40 percent are considered less than proficient.

Librarians and media specialists have been eliminated from the NES schools, while the libraries have been turned into disciplinary centers. One does not need an advanced degree to question the effectiveness of such a move. Commenting on these regressive policies, the American Library Association stated

...[E]very school should have an effective school library program. While reading and books are mainstays of the school library program, today's effective school library programs are also sophisticated learning environments that provide the education and skill building to succeed in college and the workplace... Research repeatedly shows that a well-funded and fully staffed school library with a state-certified school librarian is an integral component of a student's education. Across the United States, studies have demonstrated that students in schools with effective school library programs learn more, get better grades, and score higher on standardized tests than their peers in schools without comparable resources.

Needless to say, morale among teachers and staff has plummeted. Jessica Campos, a parent who participated in the demonstration, said that parents and teachers feel “bullied,” and said that her daughter’s school “feels very much like a prison.” Maria Benzon, a middle school teacher in the district, said that teachers are in a state of fear. Community activist Ruth Kravetz said that she expects that teachers will eventually go on strike over the changes.

The HFT referred to the demonstration as a “practice picket,” with union President Jackie Anderson saying, “We’re here because the appointed, uncertified superintendent is creating a culture of fear and intimidation.”

The posturing of the union as a defender of teachers is belied by the recent experiences, in particular in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Houston was one of the first major Democrat-led districts in the US to unsafely reopen in Fall 2020, before vaccines were even available to educators and students, and the HFT did nothing to protect them. When over 100 teachers mounted a wildcat strike against the unsafe conditions, the union said nothing, allowing untold numbers to get sick, die and develop Long COVID.

Today, the HFT union officials are using militant sounding rhetoric because they know that they could easily lose control of the situation, which they do not fundamentally oppose.

Houston’s Democratic Mayor Sylvester Turner has also made statements opposing the state’s takeover of the district. But the Democrats are a party of the capitalist class, whose aim is to divide the working class along racial and gender lines and prosecute the wars of US imperialism abroad.

Last December, President Biden signed a bill passed by the Democrat-controlled Senate that blocked a national railroad strike. The Biden administration has overseen unprecedented military budgets to fund the war in Ukraine, the deepening genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, and preparations for global war against Russia, Iran and China.

The career of Mike Miles, whom the Democrats and union officials do not fundamentally oppose, underscores the integration of the military establishment with both capitalist political parties.

Miles was previously the superintendent of Dallas ISD, where he implemented a merit-based pay system

for teachers. While in that position, Dallas County Commissioner accused Miles of being unqualified and called for his removal. Teachers in Dallas complained of micromanagement and were fearful of retaliation.

Miles is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point. After receiving his commission, he served as a company commander and in a ranger battalion. Following his military service, he worked for the State Department as a Soviet analyst in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. He later was a diplomat in Poland and then in Russia, where he was Special Assistant to the Ambassador in Russia.

The superintendent of HISD thus has very close ties to the U.S. foreign policy establishment. In his person is the coalescing of American foreign policy and its anti-working-class domestic policy.

The appointment of Miles to oversee Houston ISD is entirely undemocratic and must be opposed, but this requires the independent mobilization of the working class against both big business parties and their policies of war and austerity. The WSWS calls on Houston educators, parents and students to form an independent rank-and-file committee, in unity with educators and other workers across the US and internationally, to wage a broad-based struggle against the state conspiracy to defund and dismantle public education.



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