

Kentucky teachers speak against attacks on public education

By Naomi Spencer
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Teachers in the US state of Kentucky are holding discussions and seeking to find a way to press forward their fight for pension rights and the defense of public education in the face of repeated sabotage by the state and local teacher unions.

A series of sickouts have shaken several districts across the state, with teachers assembling in the state capital Frankfort to oppose a raft of reactionary bills moving through the General Assembly. The first job action, on February 28, involved 8 districts.

A second action spanned two days last week and closed schools in Louisville's Jefferson County Public Schools—the largest district in the state—and expanded to include the surrounding counties of Oldham, Bullitt, and Meade. The initiative by Jefferson County teachers, largely organized on social media, was denounced by the Jefferson County Teachers Association. Echoing the school authorities, JCTA President Brent McKim said the job actions were hurting low-income students even though teachers in Kentucky and all over the country were taking a stand not only for themselves but their students too.

The JCTA worked out a deal with the local school officials to allow three teachers per school to attend lobbying sessions at the state capital for the remaining days of the legislative session. The schools would be kept open with substitutes.

This has provoked anger among Louisville teachers. One teacher posted on the school district Facebook page, “With all due respect, JCTA did not support our movement to be in Frankfort for the past two days. In fact, they discouraged and chastised us. Now that we are building momentum and putting pressure on the process, suddenly JCTA and the district want to make a deal. Folks, that is all PR to influence public opinion against us. Let's keep moving forward. Encourage

your colleagues to stand up for teachers and public education. This is our shot.”

Parents also spoke out in defense of teachers. One post said, “STAND STRONG TEACHERS, DON'T BACK DOWN!! Thank you for fighting for MY kid!!” Another said, “I am not sending my kids to schools today. This is unfair and is taking their voices away. If JCPS does not stand for what's right I will. All you superintendents care about is the money, not about the teachers. Heck! I'll donate if I have to! Just let their voices be heard and don't mute them!”

After a temporary pause to allow the unions to try to dissipate anger, the state's General Assembly legislative session is set to resume Tuesday. Teachers, school workers, students, parents, and the majority of the public across Kentucky are opposed to a slate of bills aimed at strengthening the privatization drive going on across the country. One bill is a form of “backdoor vouchers,” by providing a tax credit for private school scholarships that will divert state funding to the wealthy and cause students to leave public schools, resulting in a loss of per pupil funding.

The actions were taken independently of the Kentucky Education Association. The first was called by an organization called KY 120 United; the second round was led by a new group emerging out of Jefferson County called JCPS Leads.

Two teachers in Eastern Kentucky spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the struggle. One teacher, in the Carter County school district that participated in the February 28 sickout, expressed the opinion that teachers were not adequately represented by either the Kentucky Education Association or the group calling itself KY 120 United (alternately referred to in the local press as 120 Strong).

“As far as I can tell,” they said, “there are basically

two groups that claim to represent the teachers' interests: our union, KEA, and a decentralized organization called 120 Strong. Neither seems to have a clear goal or an effective strategy or willingness to combat the attacks on public education.

"Instead, they are all trying to wait it out," he explained. "120 Strong is trying to organize so that there can be an effective sickout, since teachers aren't [legally] allowed to strike. But as of right now our plan is to send six or seven teachers per district to Frankfort when they're in session."

The teacher expressed frustration about this orientation of essentially lobbying the legislature rather than extended strike action. When asked what they thought would work to force the legislature's hand, they replied, "Sickout until they cave."

Another Eastern Kentucky teacher, from Bath County, agreed. "There is a small but vocal group that supports the idea of public funding of charter schools (supported and funded by among others the Koch brothers) and the governor [Republican Matt Bevin] is with this group.

"KEA has to be specific about what the non-negotiables are and what we'll accept. And then we have to do like [the Carter County teacher] said. We sick out until our demands are met."

"One-day sickouts do nothing," the Bath County teacher added. "The only leverage we have is to shut down the schools. That inconvenience is the only thing that will make them care that we don't agree with what they're doing."

Asked about the overwhelming opposition to the legislation, including a statement signed by all 173 superintendents across Kentucky, the teachers said administrators were speaking out of both sides of their mouths. While they voiced opposition in the media, district officials were ratcheting up pressure on school workers not to walk out.

"We got an email from our superintendent on the eve of the last sickout telling us not to," the Bath County teacher said. "It was promoting disinformation, saying that the call to action was just a scam.

"If superintendents were really on board, not only would the districts shut down, but every teacher in the district would be on buses headed to Frankfort as a unit. Then we would be noticed." They added, "Twelve thousand angry educators united in purpose would be

hard to ignore."

The actions of the KEA and JCTA underscore the strikebreaking role the unions have consistently played over the last year of teacher walkouts. Allied with the Democrats who are no less enemies of the teachers and public education as the Republicans, the unions have sought to block strikes and, if unable, to prevent more than one section of teachers from striking simultaneously with another. While seeking to prevent a nationwide strike, the unions have sold out one struggle after another, from West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona to most recently Los Angeles and Oakland, California, signing deals that ignored teachers' demands and did nothing to stop the financial starvation of the schools and the drive to privatize public education.

That is why Kentucky teachers should organize rank-and-file committees, consisting of teachers, support staff, parents and students at every school and community to prepare a powerful fight back. These committees must be independent of the unions and both corporate-controlled parties and fight for the full funding for public education and living wages and retirement benefits for students, not what the big business politicians and the unions claim they can afford.

The city of Louisville is a microcosm of the whole country. Billions are found for tax breaks for Ford, UPS, and corporate giants, while Democrats and Republicans claim there is no money for social needs.

Last month, the city's multimillionaire Democratic Mayor Greg Fischer warned of "devastating" cuts due to an expected \$65 million budget gap over the next four years. These would result in staffing reductions in nearly every Louisville Metro Government (LMG) department, including fire and ambulance services, as well as closing library branches, fire stations, health clinics, community centers, pools and city golf courses.

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