

Teacher sickouts in Kentucky, protests in Maryland and Texas

By E.P. Milligan
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The nation-wide teachers revolt that began in 2018 has continued to unfold, most recently with job actions and protests by teachers in Kentucky, Maryland, and Texas. Actions by teachers, like those taken by workers across the US and internationally, have begun to develop outside of the stranglehold of the union bureaucracies.

They continue to garner ever growing support from wide sections of workers and youth. The militant struggle of teachers underscores the need for a socialist movement of the working class—independent of the pro-Democratic Party trade unions—to defend public education.

Kentucky

Teachers in the Jefferson County Public School (JCPS) district continued a new wildcat “sickout” action yesterday for the second consecutive day. The official twitter account of the JCPS district announced at 10 p.m. tuesday night: “Due to approximately a third of teachers being absent and the inability to safely cover a large number of classes with substitute teachers, all @JCPSKY schools will be closed Wed., March 13, 2019.”

The development comes on the heels of a similar two-day sickout action conducted by Jefferson County teachers last week, which was joined by school workers in Meade, Oldham, and Bullitt counties, resulting in the closure of hundreds of schools. The latest action represents the fifth school closure in the past two weeks in the state’s largest school district.

The Louisville-area teacher actions are organized by a new group calling itself “JCPS Leads.” The organization is independent of the Kentucky Education Association, the Jefferson County Teacher Association (JCTA) and the union-affiliated KY 120 United group that was behind the February 28 rally at the capitol in Frankfort. The unions have responded to teachers’ independent actions with fear and hatred, with one KEA local affiliate describing the sickouts as “disruptive” and “undermining” community support.

The work actions have been called in response to multiple anti-public-school legislative initiatives aimed at privatizing

public education through vouchers, charter schools, and the funneling of tax money into homeschooling, private and religious operations. The legislation has been endorsed by US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council lobbying organization. Many teachers who called in sick have travelled to the state capitol in Frankfort to protest during the last days of the legislative session, which ends on March 28.

The sickouts last week were most directly in response to Kentucky House Bill 205, which would have provided a tax break for individuals or businesses who “donate” money towards state “scholarships,” which would be paid to parents to send their children to private schools. The aim is to divert tax revenue from public schools into tax credits to subsidize private schools. In addition to funneling more money into private schools this would also hive off more students from the public schools, resulting in a further loss of per-pupil funding.

HB 205 passed the House Education Committee but stalled in the full House. However, the tax credits contained in the bill may be reintroduced through the back door in another bill, HB 354, after the General Assembly’s regular session ends.

The week before last, classes were canceled after teachers turned out by the hundreds to protest HB 525, an effort to “restructure” the Teachers’ Retirement System’s Board of Trustees. This would remove or weaken the union’s representation on the board, along with educational professionals, and replace them with business and religious interests. HB 525 may be voted on at any time, as it is listed on the “House Orders of the Day.”

Another bill, Senate Bill 250, would give the power of principal selection to district superintendents rather than local school councils. This would further undermine any input from parents, teachers, and other school workers; and strengthen district administration and political establishment control, especially in larger districts like Jefferson County. That bill passed both the Senate and House on Tuesday and

now awaits the governor's signature.

Maryland

Several thousand teachers and supporters in the community marched on the Maryland state capitol in Annapolis on Monday to call for increased school funding. The march, called by the teachers' unions, was largely aimed at promoting legislation by Democratic state House leaders to increase funding for Maryland schools by \$325 million for fiscal year 2020 and by \$750 million in fiscal year 2021.

The proposal comes in the wake of the so-called "Kirwan Commission," a study undertaken by educational researchers that identified a \$2.9 billion budget gap in Maryland schools. The legislation, which totals just over \$1 billion, does not even amount to half of what is needed and the funds would be split over the course of two fiscal years.

Teachers' demands at the march went far beyond those of the union officialdom. Many protested against enormous class sizes, which have limited teachers' ability to properly focus on individual students' needs.

The lack of school counselors was also a large issue. This has been most apparent in poverty-stricken school districts, where many students have special needs because they have come from dysfunctional families or have endured various forms of childhood trauma. Kendra Lee, a school counselor from Howard County, told *Education Week* that she and one other coworker have to take care of a student population of 715. This is significantly higher than the 250-to-1 student to counselor ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.

Finally, the issue of teachers' pay featured prominently. Anne Arundel County, which includes Annapolis, like many counties within the US, instituted pay freezes on teachers following the 2008 financial collapse. Anne Arundel has refused to institute step pay increases, resulting in massive pay gaps for many teachers.

The Democrats have responded with hostility to the teachers' demands. Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert), an author of the proposed legislation, warned in a public address last week, "We do not respond well to threats." This constitutes a warning to union leaders that the political establishment is looking to them to keep teachers in line and prevent strike action.

The decision by the unions to call the protest was made in large part due to these very concerns. Cheryl Bost, the president of the Maryland State Education Association, ruled out the possibility of the unions calling a statewide work stoppage or strike. Instead, she has praised "receptive" legislators such as Miller and has pledged to put pressure on Republican Governor Larry Hogan.

Supposing such inadequate legislation even passes at all, it

will encounter fierce opposition from Governor Hogan. The conservative Republican cut \$42 million from Baltimore City schools alone in 2017. He has already stated that he would only support the legislation if every additional dollar of funding would be tied to school accountability and parental control, i.e., initiatives taken by charter schools to dismantle public education.

Texas

Several hundred teachers and supporters rallied at the capitol building in Austin, Texas on Monday to demand education funding and higher pay. Teachers also attended the rally to protest "merit" programs based on students' performance on standardized tests, which have been designed to undermine public education and promote charter schools.

Amid fears that the teachers' revolt may spread into Texas, the state Senate has approved and sent Senate Bill 3 to the House, which would give classroom teachers and librarians statewide a \$5,000 annual pay raise. Republicans have seized on the opportunity to introduce anti-public-education proposals, such as Senate Bill 4, which would provide funding for school districts based on "merit" performance.

While the annual pay raise exceeds the current annual US inflation rate by roughly 7 percent, it does not make up for ten years of declining real wages. The current pay of teachers in Texas averages to \$53,000. Adjusted for inflation, this rate is 20 percent lower than in 2008. Moreover, the bill does not address the abysmal pay of other school workers, such as bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers and janitors.

The Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA) has underscored its hostility to strike action by deliberately scheduling the rally to coincide with spring break for most Texas school districts.

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