

Polls show growing sentiment for teachers strike in Mississippi

By J. L'Heureau
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There is growing sentiment among Mississippi teachers for strike action against poverty wages, according to the results of a “Survey on Teacher Action” released by the Mississippi Association of Educators (MAE).

The statewide poll of teachers reflects escalating anger among educators across the state. Of the 1,765 respondents to the survey, almost 80 percent identified themselves as classroom teachers. Sixty-three percent stated they would participate in a one-day statewide “sickout”; 61 percent stated they would rally at the state capitol on a Saturday before the end of this school year; and nearly 40 percent stated they would walk out on a specific day and refuse to return for an indefinite amount of time.

The results are significant and mark an increasing desire by Mississippi educators to oppose low wages and terrible working conditions, leading to low retention rates. There has been no strike in the southern state of Mississippi since 1985, after which state lawmakers passed punitive regulations against striking teacher groups, including massive fines and jail time. Mississippi teachers make the second-lowest salaries in the country, ahead of South Dakota.

The growing militancy, even in the face of draconian anti-strike laws, appears within the context of teachers’ struggles across the globe which are increasing in quantity and scope. From Poland to Brazil, from India to North and South Carolina, teachers are waging a historic battle against decades-long reactionary measures imposed by all factions of the ruling elite to deprive the working class of the basic social right to a high-quality education.

On April 16, Republican Governor Phil Bryant signed a bill which claimed to provide teachers and assistant teachers a \$1,500 pay raise to go into effect at

the beginning of the next school year. Both Bryant and Lieutenant Governor Tate Reeves praised the derisory raise as an achievement. According to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), the current average salary for teachers in Mississippi is \$44,459, more than \$10,000 less than the national average, and \$7,000 less than the regional average in the southeast. The minimum salary for assistant teachers is currently \$12,500.

Adding insult to injury, subsequently it has been learned that certain categories of teachers have been excluded from the deal, including special education teachers, teachers for gifted learners, and some assistant teachers, although Bryant also claims he will rectify this “error.”

Some school districts, such as Lee County and Clarksdale Municipal have, in fact, confirmed that some teachers and assistant teachers in their schools have been excluded from the raise. Dennis Dupree, superintendent of Clarksdale Municipal School District, in the river delta county of Coahoma, stated that the raises allotted to some teachers are less than \$1,500, with some being as low as \$300.

In a state with the highest paid superintendent of education in the country—Carey Wright, whose salary is \$300,000—the state legislature is dismissing the dire economic conditions of teachers.

The Mississippi Association of Educators (MAE), the state chapter of the National Education Association (NEA), sponsored the “Survey on Teacher Action.” However, this was not in order to lead a struggle in response the growing mandate from its members, but is part of its effort to lobby the state legislature. In its statement released with the survey results, the MAE says: “Actions such as informational picketing or having a rally are not the endgame.”

An April 5 survey by WJTV News in Jackson reported an even higher proportion of teachers supporting strike action than in the MAE survey, with 79 percent of 981 teachers polled answering in the affirmative. Yet, the union is opposed to even mild protests such as informational pickets and rallies.

The organizers behind the Facebook group Pay Raise for Mississippi pointed to the reasoning behind the MAE's strategy, stating in a post: "Folks, if nothing else we have shaped the conversation. The media is *questioning the candidates on our issues*. We have made them hear us. ... The candidates know that going into this election the needs of educators cannot be ignored. We need to take this energy through the summer and into the fall and get the votes we need to elect the leaders we need" (emphasis added).

While the legislature was running down the legislative clock, the union was stalling, working to exhaust the opposition of teachers and their supporters.

This was the intent all along. The MAE underscored the fact that it never "advocate[d] or encourage[d] survey respondents to select any specific action," and said the options were listed only because they were "being strongly considered by educators."

In other words, teachers are demanding a strike, but were blocked by the MAE, which sought to use the anger of teachers as a bargaining chip in their relationships with Democratic and Republican politicians. The union admitted as much, stating "the survey's findings will guide the drafting of an organizing plan that will be implemented now through the 2020 legislative session."

But teachers have different thoughts on the matter. As part of the WJTV poll, the media stated: "[B]y state law, if teachers strike they will be breaking the law," which prompted one commenter to reply: "What's worse? Breaking a tyrannical law to hopefully improve our situation or sitting back and doing nothing while politicians continue to make our jobs more and more impossible?"

Another educator, responding to the MAE survey results, stated: "They can't get rid of or fire EVERY educator in the state. If EVERYONE joins, locks arms, protests, and marches we can be heard. We can make a change. Everyone can." Another said: "Don't expect to see a change if you don't make one. For any positive outcome, it requires the MAJORITY of educators to

stand united and unwavering. We can't expect positive change while cowering in the corner," to which another responded, "just look at SOUTH CAROLINA."

The record of the state legislature is more than clear: Mississippi's education budget has declined over the course of the entire last decade with a recurring shortfall of \$2.3 billion. This has produced a drastic shortage in certified teachers, especially in more rural areas. In a paper published in the 2017 *Mississippi Economic Review*, "Understanding the Nature of the Teacher Shortage in Mississippi," the authors state that among the economic hindrances to recruiting teachers in rural areas are "low salary and benefits, state and national requirements for highly qualified educators, entrance requirements into teacher education, geographic isolation, and poor or limited housing options."

Some counties have been forced to lay off teachers to avoid budget shortfalls in their school districts. These cuts to the state's school system have exacerbated the state's overall population decline since the last Census.

Expressing their frustration, one commenter on the Pay Raise Facebook page stated, "This is why the Legislature continues to do as they wish because educators will not unite." This lack of unity, however, has nothing to do with teachers—who are demanding action from coast to coast—and everything to do with the policy of the unions.

The Mississippi union, like the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers nationally, are doing everything they can to block strikes and prevent the unity of educators and all sections of the working class seeking to defend public education. In the service of their unholy alliance with the big business politicians responsible for the de-funding of public education and the capitalist profit system itself, there is no line the unions will not cross.

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