

“The 1 percent raise is a slap in the face.”

After one-day strike, West Virginia teachers face battle over wages and medical benefits

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After a one-day walkout in defiance of the state’s anti-strike laws, West Virginia teachers are still facing a fight against the state legislature’s efforts to maintain their low wages and to impose higher out-of-pocket medical expenses.

Last Friday, 2,000 teachers and state employees demonstrated and carried their signs into the state capitol building in Charleston while state senators unanimously approved a bill that includes a derisory 1 percent annual wage increase for teachers who already rank 48th in the nation in salaries. A similar bill will be voted on by the House of Delegates.

Governor Jim Justice, a Democrat-turned-Republican, and the Republican-controlled state legislature, also want to destroy teacher seniority rights while a bipartisan financial board is sharply increasing the premiums and deductibles paid by teachers and other state workers enrolled in the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA).

The one-day strike forced the closure of schools throughout the southern coal counties of Logan, Mingo and Wyoming. Teachers who are demanding a pay raise of at least 5 percent and no increases in medical costs are taking strike votes in other counties.

On Saturday, hundreds of educators and their supporters rallied outside the Berkeley County courthouse in downtown Martinsburg, and protests are planned for this Thursday in Ohio County, in the state’s northern panhandle. Teachers are also expected to pack public hearings on the PEIA changes scheduled for Morgantown, Charleston and Beckley over the next two weeks, and rally during a state-wide “day of action” called by the unions for Saturday, February 17.

Governor Justice, a billionaire coal magnate, and both

big business parties have steadfastly opposed any improvement in teacher salaries. While the Republicans have proposed a 1 percent wage hike, the Democrats, posing as friends of the teachers, called for a meager 3 percent increase. Even this was little more than a political stunt, since the Democrats knew this would be promptly rejected by the Republican-controlled State Senate.

“Everyone feels that a 1 percent raise is a slap in the face,” an educator in Huntington, West Virginia told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “It would mean about \$40 a month for me. Meanwhile our insurance premiums go up. I have a friend whose premium will increase by \$500 a month, based on her family income. She figured out that after her health care premiums and the cost of daycare, she would net \$200 a month.

“Senate Bill 8 will strip seniority. It infuriates me. They want to run schools like a business. It means when there is a reduction in force, counties do not have to consider seniority in laying off workers. Of course, a person with 20-25 years will cost more than one with two or three. They also want to bring in charter schools to run it like a business,” she said.

“It’s hard to live on a teachers’ salary here. After being an educator for 11 years, I still have student loan debt. I needed it for both undergrad and to get a master’s. I know several of my friends still have debt too.”

The starting wage for a West Virginia teacher with a bachelor’s degree is \$30,315, while a teacher with a master’s degree gets a starting salary of \$32,843 and one with a doctoral degree gets \$36,161. Low wages and decades of bipartisan budget cuts have led to a chronic teacher shortage with 727 vacancies for

teachers currently in the state.

Any small raises teachers get will quickly be eaten up by increased medical costs. State employees who already pay 20 percent of their health care costs are facing higher premiums under the governor's budget proposals, along with recent changes imposed by the PEIA finance board, which includes Democrats and Republicans.

In previous years, premiums were based on how much the sole state employee is paid. That was revised to include a family's total income when a state employee's insurance covers spouse or child. This will mean sharp cost increases for teachers who have deferred wage increases for years based on claims the money would be used to bolster the PEIA fund and keep health care costs down.

In an effort to mollify the anger of teachers, the governor announced last week he would drop the controversial proposal to impose a \$25 per month penalty on public employees should they fail to meet "healthy lifestyle" goals, while continuing to press for premium increases.

American Federation of Teachers, West Virginia President Christine Campbell applauded the governor, saying the political maneuver is "a step in the right direction." The AFT, WV and the larger West Virginia Education Association both endorsed Justice in the 2016 elections, WVEA President Dale Lee gushing that Justice "understands the plight that we are in in terms of teachers" even after he switched party affiliations.

Teachers and state employees are in a war against both big business parties, which have systematically starved public education and other vital services for decades even as successive Democratic and Republican administrations have showered billions in tax breaks and other incentives on the coal, energy and timber bosses who control the state's economy and political system.

During the 11-day strike in 1990 by West Virginia teachers, launched in the aftermath of a wave of militant wildcat strikes by coal miners during the Pittston strike, 22,000 educators were in a fight against then Governor Gaston Caperton, a Democrat, who oversaw school funding and pay for teachers, which would have been the worst in the country were it not for Mississippi.

While the unions hope to reach some kind of deal and

are delaying any statewide mobilization of teachers until February 17—a non-school day—there is a growing sentiment among rank-and-file teachers for a statewide strike.

This is a part of a broader shift in the mood of teachers who face an immense battle as President Trump and his billionaire education secretary, Betsy DeVos, sharply accelerate the anti-public education policies championed by the Obama administration. Teachers in St. Paul, Minnesota have threatened to strike this week, while teachers in other cities including Pittsburgh are taking strike votes. Rank-and-file teachers must take these struggles out of the hands of the unions and reject the lie that there is no money for education, while trillions are squandered on corporate tax cuts, bank bailouts and war.

"Some people seem to think that a walkout or strike means we don't care about the children," the Huntington educator told the WSWS. "The fact is we are doing this because we care. If it's an attack on my co-workers, it's an attack on me. I want to stand up for what's right. I've never been one to just sit by."

"We love the kids. If I didn't, I wouldn't work overtime every day, two Saturdays a month to catch up, and take calls at home at all hours of the day and evening. It's not just me, when I come in on the weekend, there's a lot of us."

High levels of poverty make the job of teachers even more difficult, even as they manage with less. "We have so many low-income students in Huntington, somewhere around 60 percent of the students. If these children need something—a coat, tickets for an event—we buy it for them. A ton of people do that."

"The superintendents in the state put a call out to the staffs, pointing out that for so many students the only warm meal they get is at school. A lot eat breakfast and lunch in the building and we send food home in a backpack for dinner. Otherwise they will have nothing."



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