

West Virginia teacher speaks on social conditions, issues in strike vote

Naomi Spencer
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As public school teachers and service personnel in West Virginia take votes on whether to authorize a strike in the state for the first time in nearly 30 years, the intersection between the economic, social and political issues comes to the fore.

Wages for teachers, as for the working class as a whole, are at the level of the 1970s, while costs for health care and other basic necessities have spiraled upward out of control. Meanwhile, corporations and the rich, both in the state and across the country, have amassed grotesque fortunes. Tax cuts at the state and federal level have placed the burden of government funding wholly onto the backs of the working class.

This conflict is emerging into the open with teachers in West Virginia, Pittsburgh, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and elsewhere confronting state governments over stagnant wages, untenable healthcare costs, and worsening working conditions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to J, a high school teacher in Kanawha County, West Virginia, about the possibility of a strike in the next week. “A lot of this has been driven by the teachers,” J said. “The unions have said, ‘Slow down a little bit,’ but the teachers and service personnel are pushing forward.”

Although the state’s derisive offer of a 1 percent pay raise has received much attention in the press, J emphasized that a fundamental source of the teachers’ opposition is driven by relentless health care cost increases under the Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA), the state worker insurance program.

“The benefits of the PEIA have to be funded and secured before raises mean anything. They don’t want to come out and do that, and they put it off and put it off,” J noted.

“Governor [Jim] Justice announced a freeze in the premium increases, but freezes haven’t done anything

but piss people off more. People are saying ‘Fix it, fix it now!’ There’s a mid-term in November—of course they want to put it off.”

After Justice called for a freeze, J noted, “PEIA went back and re-released their numbers sheet. Next year it freezes, but the following three years you’ll see a 38.9 percent increase. That cost is astronomical. The ‘pause’ means interest is occurring, so it just balloons.”

County by county, teachers and support staff have taken votes on strike action. The unions, J said, are “looking for margins of 70 percent, and we’ve not seen anything below mid-80s in Kanawha and Putnam Counties.” Putnam, a relatively wealthier county, “tends to be more socially conservative, so that’s where we are,” J added.

“There has been a higher ratio of service personnel voting to strike than teachers. The service personnel have more to lose, because they are more ‘replaceable’ in a sense. We have a teacher shortage, with over 700 unfilled positions, but janitors have no seniority.”

“We can’t find enough bus drivers,” J added. “They only earn \$11 an hour, and then they turn around and pay a third of that for their insurance. All that for doing one of the hardest jobs ever.”

Public schools are on the front line of the social crisis gripping the United States. In West Virginia, the collapse of the coal industry has contributed to a massive population loss and devastating drug epidemic. “This is coal country and there are a lot of drugs. School budgets have declined because of the collapse of the tax base,” J said. “Five hundred students have left Kanawha County,” meaning schools have been deprived of per-pupil funding.

In J’s school, changes in curriculum and graduation standards have also contributed to falling attendance.

“The number of required credits has increased, and the issue with that is that you have a lot of students who have not failed anything. They have ten extra credits by their senior year, so they just quit coming to school and they fail everything they don’t need.” As a result, academic and testing results fall, opening teachers and the school as a whole up to state and federal penalties.

“We also have scheduling problems,” J commented. “Every year we have to cut teachers as the population decreases. We just need extra electives, fun things—but there aren’t enough extra teachers for those. They put together a ‘study hall’ instead, which is in the library. But our library also serves as a public library, so you can imagine how disruptive a bunch of noisy teenagers can be.

“Our school was built in 1999 to serve an underserved area,” J explained. “So the school has a library, a health clinic, and a credit union. We have a clothing bank and a food bank.”

Hunger and food insecurity are deepening. Four years ago, in 2014, J said, “The food pantry saw about 20 families a month. Now we have 70 to 90 families a month. The food pantry used to be used by families as a supplementary resource. Now it is the main source for groceries for these families.

“I have kids every week that I pack a backpack for, for them to take home so they can eat over the weekend. I have a walk-in closet in my classroom stocked with food. I tell the kids not to even ask, because I don’t want them to feel ashamed, but to just go in and take what they need.”

“I have no doubt that this will pass and there will be a statewide teachers strike,” J stated. In 1990, they said, some teachers broke the picket lines, allowing the school administrations to continue to keep schools open. That situation sowed bitter divisions among teachers and created long-lasting animosity against the district superintendents.

This time around, J suggested, the state and county superintendents would seek to avoid that conflict—a maneuver that the unions are all too happy to accommodate. “The teachers will make up strike days as school days added on at the end of the year, like snow days, and they’ll just add those to the end of our contract. After 27 school days, that’s when we start to lose money.

“The unions have tried to pump the brakes a couple

of times,” J added. “But West Virginia is a right-to-work state. Teachers have said they will drop their membership if the unions don’t do what they want. The teachers are setting their own terms in this dispute.

“Legislators have said this will make them less likely to budge. But both sides [teachers and legislators] have said they’re not going to budge. We have said we require dedicated funding for our health insurance, and they have said they will not introduce a new tax to pay for it,” J noted.

“But teachers have the public on their side. How many parents are depending on the schools to have their kids somewhere so they can go to work?”

Beyond the pay and benefits issues, an ideological agenda is involved. From Education Secretary Betsy DeVos on down, a section of the ruling class is bent on destroying the right to free, secular, public education.

“One of the senators most involved in fighting the teachers, Robert Karnes, has eight children he has homeschooled,” J noted. “One of the bills he has proposed is a voucher program, which would take even more money out of the public education fund. Under his plan, homeschooling parents would get between \$8,000 and \$11,000 per child depending on the grade level.” J expressed concern over the lack of accountability for homeschooling parents, and the potential for abuse of the system and of children themselves.



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