

“We want to be able to afford to live”

West Virginia teachers press for statewide strike

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After an overwhelming county-by-county strike vote by West Virginia teachers, the presidents of the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) and the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) held a press conference Monday to assure state legislators that “no one wants to see” a strike.

“No one wants to see this culminate in a strike,” said Dale Lee, president of the WVEA. Calling strikes “disruptive,” he said, adding, “A strike is the last activity that would be used, and it’s certainly not something our members take lightly.”

Lee acknowledged, however, that there were many educators who were “angry we are not on strike today.” Support for a strike, he admitted, was over 90 percent in a large number of counties, with larger cities posting results even higher. One-day walkouts, rallies, demonstrations and meetings of teachers and public-sector workers took place throughout the state in the lead-up to the vote, and other protests have continued this week.

“Anger has been boiling for a while, as we’ve essentially taken a pay cut over the past three years,” a music teacher, Nicole, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “But health care, [the cuts in] PEIA [the Public Employee Insurance Agency] was the tipping point. Our annual pay increase doesn’t keep up with inflation and the increased health care costs. For me to take two of my children to an urgent care, it would be \$50 each, or \$100! I’m living on between \$5 to \$15 a day with four children and a husband who is also an educator.”

In addition to opposing cuts in health care, Nicole said, teachers were determined to win a significant salary. West Virginia educators are presently paid 48th out of 50 US states. “I have a Masters degree, nine years of experience and I just broke \$40,000,” she said. “We need \$20,000 across the board for all state workers. Then I could pay

off credit card debt accrued during my non-paid maternity leave, and I’d buy a home.”

Referring to the role of the unions, she said, “I have been very involved with my union, co-president at one point. But my husband and I have received phone calls and visits from WVEA because we expressed our anger and desire to strike. They said ‘Let’s talk about this.’ The fact is this movement is from the bottom up, not top down and they tried to squash it. It’s the persistence of people which is driving this,” she said, adding that a Facebook group of rank-and-file teachers had “grown up out of nowhere,” which now has over 20,000 members.

While trying to dampen expectations, the union officials are pleading with the big business legislators for some kind of gesture to sell to their members in order to call off any further struggle. To the union executives, the strike vote is not a mandate for collective action but a maneuver to allow teachers to blow off steam while the AFT and WVEA work behind the scenes for a rotten compromise.

Lee explained the unions needed some kind of “movement” from the 1 percent wage increase advocated by Governor Jim Justice, the wealthiest man in the state. As to 1 or 2 percent, he said the membership “isn’t buying it.”

Talking out of both sides of her mouth, AFT-WV president Christine Campbell repeatedly stated its not a matter of “if, but when” referring to a strike—but that a strike could be averted if there is “movement in a positive direction” from the legislature. Despite being repeatedly prodded by reporters to specify their demands, Lee and Campbell avoided the question.

Both union officials are well aware that teachers’ demands—to reverse years of stagnant and falling wages, win significant improvements in their living standards and expanded funding for their cash-starved schools—far

exceeds what the unions are prepared to accept.

While Lee and Campbell issued vague demands for “movement” on a vague salary “bump,” an amorphous “fix” on PEIA, and retaining seniority rights, they were clear as a whistle on protecting the financial and institutional interests of the labor bureaucracy, emphasizing that “no action against dues checkoff” was acceptable.

The two corporate-controlled parties have been steadfast in their resistance to the teachers’ demands. On Monday afternoon the state House of Delegates voted down both a proposal for a three-year, 3 percent annual raise for teachers as well as a 3-1-1 deal.

On Tuesday, the State House of delegates passed, by 98-1, an insignificant increase to 2 percent the first year and 1 percent in each of the following three years. The governor’s proposal for 1-1-1-1-1 passed by the Senate, amounts to about \$400 a year for teachers and \$220 for service personnel annually.

The extraction industries and other big business interests—which are fixated on rolling back property taxes and bankrupting public education even further—have long dominated the West Virginia legislature. The routine “buying” of representatives was emphasized last Friday when a small farmer running as a first-time candidate for the House of Delegates was cut off and ejected from the chamber during a public hearing for listing how much in political donations her state representatives got from coal, oil and gas corporations.

Several teachers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about their determination to defend public education and the rising tide of anger from educators and public employees.

A reader of the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* said, “My son is a high school biology teacher. I am in total support of the educators fighting for better wages and insurance. He will have to leave West Virginia next year because he can’t afford to raise a family here. It’s a shame, because he loves his students, and they love him.”

The music teacher Nicole added, “I was in the gallery at the House chamber in the Capitol and saw them all slapping each other on the back.” She continued, “I don’t know how we are supposed to have discussions and/or negotiate with people so completely out of touch. It’s been so long since they, if ever, really worked. They have no clue. Frankly I don’t think they care.

“The claim that tax cuts for corporations and big business will bring business to the state is faulty logic. They are just pandering to whoever is going to line their

pockets and trying to find a convincing argument for those who aren’t paying attention.”

Referring to the clash between the aspirations of rank-and-file teachers and the AFT and WVEA, Nicole added, “Unless the people on bottom come up with a list of demands, and make them substantial, the leadership will dust them off. Three percent to 15 percent isn’t enough. There are also things other than PEIA we should ask for while the fire is hot.

“We need to lower the class cap. In fact, there is no class cap in high school. We also should have more teacher assistants in the primary grades. In the Fayette County schools, there is a building where they are teaching students in the bottom, but the top level is condemned.

“We need to insure that people have clean water and food and homes that don’t look like shanty towns. Our children think it’s normal not to have electricity or warm water, and have teeth to be rotten to the gums. We have babies that come into kindergarten and can’t hold a fork or come in dirty every day. In kindergarten, there is no naptime, no art time; they are required to know 88 sight words but many children are so far behind they can’t recognize a letter or a number. It is extremely difficult. Twenty-three children in the classroom, how can we meet their needs? It boggles my mind that that’s acceptable.

“Our support professionals, cafeteria workers and those who drive our buses, have just as much to do with education as the classroom teacher does. They are different facets, all part of a very important working system, but they are taken for granted.

“Everyone I know wants to be respected and they want to be able to afford to live. They aren’t asking for mansions or steak every night. They just don’t want to feed their babies canned spaghetti or McDonald’s. It’s not unreasonable. More important than a want, it’s a need.

“Capitalism is geared to the wealthy. If we want to move forward as a society, we can’t cling to that ideology. We have to be willing to share our knowledge and wealth with everyone. Everything goes against making education a business.”



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