

County-wide walkouts spread, as West Virginia teachers demand statewide strike

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On Friday, West Virginia teachers and school workers from five counties walked out in a one-day strike leading-up to a statewide demonstration in Charleston on Saturday. Teachers from Clay, Lincoln, Cabell, Mason and Wayne counties struck, while hundreds rallied at the Capitol and others “walked-in” at their schools to press their demand for salary increases and affordable health care.

An overwhelming percentage of the state’s teachers have voted for a statewide strike. If carried out, it would be the first such action since 1990. West Virginia, a “right to work” state, has illegalized strikes by public sector workers.

Teachers are facing not only the arrogant intransigence of the billionaire Governor Jim Justice and state legislators offering an insulting one or two percent pay increase, but the unions’ determination to subordinate the needs of teachers to the “legislative process”, i.e. the profit priorities of the political establishment, both Democrats and Republicans.

American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) president Christine Campbell told the raucous crowd Friday morning, “We are so glad you’re here to talk to your legislators. We want to make sure, first and foremost, they hear your stories and that you do it in a respectful way....” Campbell and West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) president Dale Lee stressed that they were seeing “movement” among legislators in “finding a funding source” for the Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA).

In the evening, with a smaller group of teachers present, the union organized cheering as Democratic legislators exited the Senate chamber, striking “boxing” poses to supposedly symbolize their determination to fight for teachers.

This is an exercise in cynical hypocrisy. The

Democrats are countering proposals for a one or two percent pay rise with their own derisory call for a three percent increase, which will not even make up for soaring health care costs. The Democrats under the Obama administration spearheaded the destruction of public education, the victimization of teachers and the promotion of charter schools.

The Democrats and their allies in the unions are doing everything in their power to contain growing anger among teachers. The West Virginia unions, in consultation with national leaders Randi Weingarten (AFT) and Lily Garcia (National Education Association, NEA), will seek to quash or contain a strike should they be forced to call one.

Thousands more teachers are expected to attend the protest today, as buses filled with educators converge on Charleston.

The momentum has also continued to build among other West Virginia workers, parents and students. On Wednesday, members of the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association (WVSSPA), which includes several thousand custodians, lunch workers, bus drivers and aides, voted to strike by 72 percent.

John Shaffer, a bus driver for Lewis County Schools, told WDTV, “We just want to get together and all of us get to say what’s on our mind. This is a pressure cooker, and it’s going to explode. Employee tensions are rising.”

Kindergarten aide Lynn spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, also giving voice to the anger of school support workers. “I am hoping that us coming out on strike will help. My dad was a coal miner and was in many strikes. He would never accept crossing a picket line.

“How wonderful it would be to go to bed at night and not worry about paying a doctor’s bill. If we could get

PEIA straightened out, I'd be happy. I don't want to pay ridiculous amounts, or be told where I can go to the doctor. We have never seen a pay raise because of the increasing cost of insurance. I've worked for 37 years, and years ago PEIA was good and didn't have all this paperwork. But it's been deteriorating for about 20 years, maybe longer. I am of retirement age but I just feel like I have to keep working."

Ashley, a first-year preschool teacher who attended the demonstration Friday night told the WSWS that the claim that there is "no money" for decent wages, health benefits, and a well-resourced public school system is "nonsense."

"What if Jim Justice paid more taxes? What if Donald Trump paid more taxes? What if the corporations paid more taxes? There's enough money."

She responded to the WSWS' statement calling for the establishment of rank-and-file teachers committees: "I would definitely be interested in forming a committee like that."

Decades of de-funding of public education, the use of standardized testing as a weapon in the privatization of schooling, and a bipartisan policy of promoting edu-businesses has led to a deep pent-up anger among educators. As a result, struggles over wages, benefits and classroom conditions are breaking out across the US.

A list of just a few of the struggles occurring alongside West Virginia include:

- It was announced this week that Pittsburgh teachers, paraprofessionals and clerical-technical staff voted nearly unanimously to authorize a strike, 2,309 in favor to 144 against. Teachers are demanding reduced class sizes and increased support for early childhood teachers among other things. The union last went on strike in 1975.

- A strike was averted in the St. Paul, Minnesota schools after the union agreed to a two-year contract with 1 percent salary increases each year. The union also agreed to work together with the district to "raise revenue." There has not yet been a vote on the deal. Minneapolis teachers held rallies this week as well, demanding lower class sizes and more control over teacher calendars.

- Teachers in Orange County, Florida protested this week by refusing to work "off the clock" and rallying before the school board meeting. Teachers demanded

better working conditions, more planning time and more instructional time. A majority surveyed in the district said they considered quitting as a result of overwork and underpay.

- Hundreds of teachers in the Atlantic City, New Jersey district of Pleasantville protested Tuesday night at a school board meeting and have been picketing before and after school. The district is offering no pay increase at all and teachers have been working for a year without a contract.



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