

“It’s time for a general strike or protest, nationwide”

West Virginia teachers denounce education cuts, social crisis

A WSWS reporting team
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Teachers, school employees and their supporters who attended a rally in Charleston, West Virginia on Saturday afternoon spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about their struggle against the state government’s efforts to impose large increases in health care insurance charges and a real wage cut on education staff.

WSWS reporters also handed out several thousand copies of a statement published by the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter*.

The overall mood among workers was one of militancy and determination for a unified fight by the working class. Workers described the impact of decades of real wage cuts and the broader social crisis in the region, which has been devastated by a state-wide opioid epidemic. This is the legacy of more than 30 years of job destruction, particularly in the Appalachian coal mines, overseen by the trade unions. While the rally was used by the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia and other unions to promote the Democratic Party’s campaign in the November 2018 mid-term elections, many workers denounced both parties.

Daniel worked as an electrician for 26 years before starting as an electrical studies teacher last year in secondary and post-secondary education. He said, “The politicians try to pit us against each other. They want us in a class system. They want black against whites and men against women. They try to use social programs to pit us against one another by saying: ‘You’re working every day, and you’re paying the bill for these people, and these people are on welfare and food stamps.’

“Well there’s a lot of people in this nation who are doing everything they can every day, and it’s not

enough. There’s no reason why the working class of this nation is scrambling to eat.”

Daniel added, “It is ridiculous. We have a sitting governor Jim Justice who is ‘West Virginia’s first billionaire.’ How did you get your billions? Off the backs of coal miners, and off the backs of people who came to your resort and worked.

“West Virginia has horrible social conditions. I’m from Fayette County. The five largest coal-producing counties in the state are the poorest counties. Why? We’re mining more coal now than we were in the 1970s, with 150,000 men, but we’re doing it now with less than 15,000 people. Companies are getting more profits.”

Dan is a retired teacher, and his daughter teaches at Kanawha County. “I think it’s time for a general strike or protest, nationwide, because of so many things that are going on,” he said. “They’re doing everything they can to loot everything that belongs to the public.”

“Trump is about to sell off public infrastructure. The roads being turned into toll roads. They’re going to give away the national monument lands and allow for mining on that, and a trillion dollars’ worth of money from the treasury. I think it’s time for class warfare in the other direction.”

Sheri, a 25-year elementary school social studies teacher, said, “The accusation about us leaving the kids behind in the classroom by threatening to strike, that we’re not fighting for the kids, is not true. The respect for teachers from our government has been less than nil. I’m re-registering as an independent, because the Democrats and Republicans are the same.”

Referring to the unions’ slogan of “Remember in November,” aimed at corraling workers behind the

election of Democrats in the November 2018 mid-term elections, she commented: “Why do we have to wait for an election to impeach them?”

Belen, who has worked for 29 years as a sixth-grade math teacher at Washington Irving Middle School, attended the rally with her retired husband Dennis. “Even the 1 or 2 percent [wage increase] they are talking about it not real,” Belen said. “We have been taking a net pay cut for the past few years, and they want us to keep taking that.”

Dennis said: “We went without raises for a long time. They said that we didn’t get paid well, but we always had good benefits. Now they are taking that from us.

“I am a Republican, but all the politicians just care for the rich,” he added. “When the Republicans are in office, the Democrats will say they will do this and that, but when they get in they don’t do it, and then the Republicans say they will do this and that.

Robin and Linda are service personnel in Braxton County, working as support staff in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms. Robin also works as an autism mentor. Poverty and the drug epidemic have contributed to the demand on schools to provide additional help for children with special needs like learning and behavioral disorders.

“We are a pretty poor district,” Linda said. “Coal mines shut down, and we have nothing.” Robin added, “Unfortunately for our area we are probably one of the highest paid jobs, and that says a lot. There’s a lot of drug usage in our area as well; as a poor county, I think that’s what people are turning to.”

Coal mine layoffs in Braxton County rose sharply in the last five years. “My husband was a coal miner,” Linda said. “He got laid off and had to retire—he was forced into retirement. So I carry the insurance. That’s why we want it fixed, not frozen.”

On the paltry one percent wage increase, she added, “One percent is a slap in our face. I don’t think we’re going to accept it, because it’s not a fix. We’re going to be right back into this mess next year.”

Kristal has worked as a school cook in Braxton County for 12 years. “It’s a real struggle from paycheck to paycheck,” she said. “You don’t make \$25,000 a year. You do what you have to do to make ends meet. Ninety percent of us in the kitchens do custodian work in the summer cleaning the rooms.

“I could probably go to WalMart and make as good

money. But I love the kids. I feel like I make a difference. But if they start cutting the health coverage, I’m going to be in the negative.”

Her co-worker Stephanie added: “With PEIA [the Public Employees Insurance Agency], if our spouses make more money, they’re going to take more from the insurance. It’s not fair.”

Kristal commented: “I think we’re all being taken by both parties. Whether you’re white, black, yellow or green, we’re here for the same reason. We deserve better.”



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