

Thousands rally to defend teachers in Charleston, West Virginia

Niles Niemuth
19 February 2018

Thousands of teachers, other public employees and their supporters rallied Saturday in Charleston, West Virginia to demand a wage increase and protest soaring health care costs. Fearful that the immense anger of teachers could get out of their control, the West Virginia teachers unions announced a two-day walkout on Thursday and Friday.

This weekend's protest is the latest expression of working-class anger over social inequality throughout the US and internationally. There are many signs of mounting opposition among teachers, students and workers in the US to the decades-long assault on working conditions and on public education.

Students at high schools in Kiefer and Tulsa, Oklahoma walked out of class this week to demand pay increases for their teachers, who have not had a raise in a decade. Teachers in Phoenix, Arizona carried out sickouts last week to protest threatened pay cuts, and more than 2,300 teachers, paraprofessionals and clerical-technical staff in Pittsburgh voted last week to authorize a strike over class sizes and demand support for early childhood teachers.

Since early February, teachers across West Virginia have been carrying out countywide walkouts and other protests over an insulting one percent per year salary increase proposed by the Republican-controlled state legislature. Neither the Republican proposal nor the Democratic alternative for a three-percent increase would cover rising healthcare costs, resulting in an effective cut in pay.

After the rally, Dale Lee, president of West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and Christine Campbell, president of the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV), announced plans for the statewide walkout. The teachers will also be joined by school service personnel who authorized a

strike by an overwhelming margin last week.

The unions have done everything they can to dissipate anger through limited strikes and encouraging dependence on the governor and the state legislature. If the WVEA and AFT-WV were forced to call a limited walkout, it is because there is a deep sentiment among teachers and public employees to fight even in the face of the state's laws, which prohibit public employee strikes. If the walkouts happen, they will mark the first statewide job action by teachers since the 1990 strike against Democratic Governor Gaston Caperton, over what was then a 10 percent wage increase offer.

Zelda, a cook at Mingo Central High School, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We are here because of our insurance. We are mostly concerned about the PEIA [Public Employees Insurance Agency]. If you go into a hospital even one time, you are in bad shape. With just a one or even three percent pay increase we still end up losing money. It is making it hard to survive."

"We live in Mingo County, the heart of what they call the billion-dollar coalfield. My daughter asked me, 'If we are in the billion-dollar coalfield, why doesn't Williamson have skyscrapers?' Why do we have so many people living poverty? We have allowed these coal companies to come in and rape and rob all of our land, kill our men, and we got nothing in return. They left nothing for the community but destitution."

West Virginia teachers, who are among the lowest-paid in the country, have been pushing for a significant wage increase and the full funding of the PEIA. The state's billionaire coal boss governor, Jim Justice, a Democrat-turned-Republican, and the state legislature have steadfastly opposed any significant improvement in wages while proposing a battery of reactionary measures, including attacking seniority and lowering qualifications for new teachers.

The unions hope that the announced walkouts will be enough to tamp down anger and redirect energy behind the Democratic Party in the 2018 midterms. Campbell declared that the planned walkout is a warning to legislators “to do your jobs, or we’ll vote you out.”

Throughout Saturday’s event, the unions were desperate to present Democratic lawmakers as allies of teachers. The reality is that the Democrats have overseen state politics for most of the last century and have starved public education of resources even as they showered tax cuts and other incentives on the coal mining and energy interests that control the state.

Nationally, the AFT and National Education Association (NEA) were among the most determined supporters of the Obama administration, which expanded charter schools and victimized teachers for the crisis of public education in the US.

The rally platform was stacked with state union executives as well as representatives of the national unions, including Mary Cathryn Ricker, executive vice president of the AFT, and Becky Pringle, vice president of the NEA. They delivered one demagogic speech after another but put forward no concrete demands.

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) provided “security” for the event with marshals dressed in camouflage and with yellow bandanas around their necks. The UMWA’s secretary-treasurer Levi Allen was brought on stage to posture as a defender of teachers and staunch opponent of Justice. The union endorsed Justice in 2015 when he campaigned for governor as a Democrat, claiming that he was “one of the good coal operators.”

Many teachers expressed concern about changes to the state’s health insurance plans and rising healthcare costs. Under the current proposal, the PEIA would consider an entire family’s income when calculating costs, resulting in a significant increase in costs for many teachers and other public workers.

Justin, a marketing employee who came to support his wife, a teacher, explained: “What PEIA would do, if I’m on her insurance, she would go from paying \$80 per month to \$360. So imagine trying to have a family on your insurance.”

“The government hasn’t done anything at all for us. They’re cutting education; they’re getting rid of work protections. Both parties have back pockets, and we all see that. The whole two-party system thing is a joke.

They have the same policies. They’re controlled by the same interest groups, the rich. I’ve been angry since Bush. Even Obama, he doubled the drone strikes. He didn’t do what he said he would.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact