

“This struggle should be spread nationally”

Two-day statewide teacher walkout planned in West Virginia

Nancy Hanover
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Following a rally Saturday of an estimated 5,000-10,000 educators and public-sector workers in Charleston, West Virginia, protests continue to mount throughout the state over demands for decent pay and benefits. On Monday, teachers in Braxton County walked out in a one-day action. A two-day statewide walkout is scheduled for Thursday and Friday.

The struggle in West Virginia takes place in the context of growing militancy by educators, parents and students seeking to defend teachers and the right to high quality public education. From Oklahoma to New Jersey, decades of cuts to public education, implemented by both Democrats and Republicans, have resulted in the rise of for-profit education companies, alongside attacks on the living standards of educators.

In addition to cutting school workers' wages, school districts and the state legislature have imposed sky-high deductibles and punitive co-pays on educators and public-sector workers.

In just the past few weeks, teachers have held strike votes and staged protests in many locations, some of which have not seen a strike for decades. After a year and a half of failed negotiations, Pittsburgh teachers voted overwhelmingly for strike action, seeking lower class sizes and increased salaries. It would be the first walkout in the city since 1975. Minneapolis teachers are rallying over stalled negotiations on wages, class sizes and recess for students. Jersey City teachers are threatening strike action, emphasizing the need for relief from healthcare cuts.

Thousands of Oklahoma teachers, currently ranked 49th in salary in the nation, are demanding across-the-board raises of \$10,000. A petition calling for a walkout has received 5,000 signatures. Strike action by educators is illegal in Oklahoma, and a strike there would be the first since 1990, the same year as the only statewide West Virginia teachers' strike.

With such an explosive situation nationally, the American

Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) are seeking to quash the struggle in West Virginia and find an accommodation with the big-business legislature that preserves their dues checkoff and their “seat at the table.” After years of preserving labor peace in alliance with the Obama administration, shutting down major struggles in Wisconsin (2011), Chicago (2012) and Detroit (2015-16), the union leaders rightly fear that any substantial gains in West Virginia would set off a tsunami of struggles nationally.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Rebecca, a primary school teacher in West Virginia, said, “These are problems all over the nation. Healthcare is a major problem everywhere and must be fixed nationwide. The way it is now you almost don't want to have to go to the doctor. If you do, premiums go up, deductibles go up. I need an echocardiogram every year. I have a \$500 deductible and 20% co-pay. It costs me about \$450 every time for the last 10 years.”

Aware of the national implications of a statewide strike, the WVEA and AFT-WV used the occasion of the mass rally to announce a limited two-day walkout throughout West Virginia. This proposal was devised to both let off steam and deflect the more militant rank-and-file demands for all-out strike action. The “strike” will, by arrangement, be provided legal cover by local school superintendents closing schools.

While the initial walkouts of West Virginia teachers erupted two weeks ago in the southern former coal counties largely spontaneously, the limited walkout has been embraced by the unions as a controlling tactic. This strategy was created in consultation with AFT executive vice president Mary Cathryn Ricker, who flew to Charleston and attended the rally. It aims to keep the job action under the control of the unions and subject to their legislative deal-making with Democrats and Republican politicians.

Feverish behind-the-scenes negotiations between AFT

president Christine Campbell, WVEA president Dale Lee and state lawmakers are taking place at the Capitol. As for the membership, the union leaders have kept them in the dark, repeatedly refusing to specify a wage demand. To ensure maximum flexibility in making a deal, the union leadership has likewise only called for a vague “fix” of public sector healthcare through the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA). It is apparent that they aim to craft a deal acceptable to the state’s businessmen but which they can “sell” to the increasingly militant membership.

Speaking for the extraction industries and other transnational companies doing business in the state, legislators have opposed more than two or three percent wage increases and imposing more business taxes to fund PEIA. West Virginia teachers are now ranked 48th in the US in salary and have faced steadily increasing co-pays and deductibles, despite twice giving up wage increases to provide funding for PEIA.

In a similar vein, Democratic and Republican state legislators continued their own shadowboxing on Monday, resulting in several phony “fixes” to PEIA. The state House approved a transfer of \$29 million from the state’s “rainy day” fund to PEIA, the Senate agreed to move a portion of funds from sports betting to PEIA and passed a bill to take 20 percent of any future state surplus for healthcare.

All these measures aim to prevent, at all costs, calls for substantially increasing taxes on natural gas extraction or in any way decreasing business profits in the state. Both big-business parties and Governor Jim Justice, a Republican-turned-Democrat-turned Republican, firmly agree.

In a particularly transparent *quid pro quo* for the union’s role in seeking to head off a genuine statewide struggle, the senators on Monday amended a bill that would deny state teacher union presidents the ability to accrue retirement time while holding full-time union positions to omit the current presidents.

Teachers are becoming appropriately wary. The long history of bipartisan attacks on education, both at the statewide and national level, has not gone without notice. “Trust no promises without a funding source. We are still waiting for the minimum salary for a teacher to become \$43,000,” wrote West Virginia educator Richard Tibbetts, from the Mason County Schools, in a comment to the *West Virginia Metro News*.

Emily, an 8th grade teacher, referred to the fact that the unions had not made any concrete demands, telling the WSWS, “A lot of the members are frustrated. We want a clear-cut statement: when will the leadership give in? What demands will be met? Right now, it seems like the leadership is waiting for its members to come up with that. It’s hard to gauge what we’re waiting for.”

“Be very suspicious of future promises,” warned James Angove, a veteran educator, on the *Metro News* site. “Teachers were promised the stars and the moon in the late 70’s and 80’s. We found out very quickly that promises are not worth a warm cup of spit. Please don’t buy into anything in the future. The future is now!”

The WSWS wrote in the statement mass distributed to teachers in Charleston, that “Rank-and-file teachers must take the conduct of this battle out of the hands of the WVEA and AFT-WV. The SEP [Socialist Equality Party] urges teachers, school employees, state workers, parents and students to elect rank-and-file committees at every school, workplace and community to prepare for a statewide strike. Meetings and demonstrations should be called, and appeals issued to school employees and public-sector workers throughout the US...”

Rebecca said she had read the statement and agreed with it. “The people you have listed—teachers, school employees, public sector workers—they run the state. The politicians may stand on a podium and say one thing when running into elections, but they are pushing public education to the bottom of the list. Teachers are the reason for all other professions in the world.”

She continued, “Where do the Trump tax cuts go? What are they going to fund? Our power bills have gone up here in West Virginia, where does that money go to? All to big business. They constantly say there isn’t any money. Democrats, Republicans, Independents—they are just looking out for themselves. Their campaigns are funded by those big companies, and that’s who they are going to please. They are millionaires, and I never expected to be one, but I also never expected to have to tell my kids to wait until the 15th or the 30th of the month because I couldn’t afford things including going to the doctor.

“This struggle should be spread nationally. Trump says unemployment is at its lowest level ever. He should come to West Virginia and see that teachers qualify for SNAP or WIC. People with a higher education have to apply just so they can simply eat each month.”



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