

West Virginia legislature issues ultimatum to teachers as statewide walkout begins

Shannon Jones
22 February 2018

On the eve of a scheduled two-day statewide walkout by teachers in West Virginia set for Thursday and Friday, the state legislature issued a provocative ultimatum calling on educators to accept an inadequate pay offer backed by threats of legal action.

West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey released a statement on Wednesday calling the walkout “unlawful.” He said his office stood ready to support any local authorities that might try to block the strike by means of court injunctions. In a statement Tuesday afternoon, state School Superintendent Steve Paine delivered the same message, declaring, “work stoppages by public employees are not lawful in West Virginia.”

Some county school superintendents have announced school closures for Thursday and Friday, while others, like Ohio County Schools Superintendent Kim Miller, reiterated the illegality of a strike. Miller told the press, “An injunction may occur in the near future that will force me to force employees to come to work.”

In advance of the walkout, articles appeared in the corporate media warning teachers of consequences, including possible dismissal, should they strike. A 1990 opinion by the state Attorney General’s Office was cited this week in the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, threatening that striking teachers could be suspended, fired, barred from teaching for a year or even fined and jailed for defying any court injunction ordering them back to work.

Teachers are determined to fight. Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Rebecca, a teacher in West Virginia, said, “My mom was a teacher. She went on strike in 1990, and I was in the ninth grade, so I know what it means. But everything they accomplished in 1990 is gone now. West Virginia became 48th in teacher pay in 2007 and has stayed here. I have to work

a second job to supplement my income and provide for my family, mostly because of PEIA [Public Employee Insurance Agency] fees.”

Jenny spoke of the broad public support the teachers struggle is generating. “You should know that many residents and students are supporting our teachers and their fight. Communities are coming together to help parents burdened by the strike by providing child care, and since many children are from very poor families, food pantries and churches are making sure kids have lunch.”

The salary increases for teachers advocated by the Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature are derided by educators as an “insult to our intelligence.” The bill passed by the Republican-controlled House and Senate calls for an immediate 2 percent pay raise for teachers, with 1 percent increases for each of the next two years.

The wealthiest man in the state, Governor Jim Justice, who has flip-flopped between Democratic and Republican parties whenever politically expedient, is expected to sign the bill and has urged teachers and other school employees to accept the deal. Six of 12 Senate Democrats supported the legislation.

A strike was sanctioned by the overwhelming vote of educators throughout all 55 counties across the state. The American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) and the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), responded by calling the limited, two-day action, which is aimed at letting off steam as the unions continue negotiations with state legislators.

Recent weeks have seen an escalating series of county walkouts and protests, spearheaded by teachers in the former coal mining counties of southern West Virginia.

The struggle by West Virginia teachers takes place

amidst signs of growing militancy among educators nationwide. In Oklahoma, teachers are demanding an across-the-board pay increase and have started a petition calling for a walkout. Teachers in Jersey City, New Jersey and Pittsburgh are also threatening strike action.

For these reasons, the AFT-WV and the WVEA are particularly concerned to limit the scope of the walkout. The unions fear that after decades in which the class struggle has been bottled up, the determined struggle of West Virginia teachers could serve as an inspiration for a broader movement of the working class.

The unions are seeking to derail the mounting demands for action by the membership by subordinating teachers' interests to the political jockeying of various Democratic legislators. To this end, they are advancing the cynical slogan "Remember in November," aimed at electing Democrats in the midterm elections. In reality, the Democrats, like the Republicans, are beholden to the transnational energy companies that dominate the state and oppose any tax increases that would impact the bottom line of big business.

At a mass rally of teachers in Charleston on February 17, union officials touted Democratic politicians as allies of teachers in flagrant disregard of the actual record of the Democratic Party, which controlled the state for the major part of the 20th century, starving education and public services of funds.

Teachers should recall that it was Governor Gaston Caperton, a millionaire Democrat, who threatened the mass firing of teachers in 1990. At that crucial turning point, the AFT and NEA caved and ordered the 19,000 teachers back to work, rather than fighting to extend the strike to the entire working class of West Virginia. Meanwhile, the Democratic-controlled state legislature refused to even consider demands by teachers for a 5 percent pay increase.

Caperton had been elected in 1988 with the support of virtually all the unions in West Virginia. He soon launched an onslaught against workers in the state, sending state police to smash the picket lines of striking Pittston coal miners and cutting \$100 million from the state budget, including a hiring freeze and the closure of state-run hospitals. At one protest at the state capitol, Caperton arrogantly told teachers to "shut up" when he was interrupted by shouts and catcalls.

In exchange for calling off the strike, the unions accepted a vague pledge from Democratic Party leaders in the state legislature to call a special session to discuss "school finance reform." The long-term result of this betrayal has been to leave West Virginia teachers near last in the US in terms of salaries.

Teachers cannot subordinate their fight to the maneuvers of the unions with the Democratic Party, which is just as hostile to teachers as the Republicans, but must chart an independent political course in opposition to the whole corporate controlled political framework.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the WSWS Teacher Newsletter are urging educators, school employees, state workers and parents to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the AFT-WV and WVEA and elect rank-and-file committees at every school, workplace and community.

These committees should launch a fight to guarantee full and adequate funding for public education, and decent pay and benefits for teachers and public employees. This should include an immediate 50 percent pay increase and the elimination of all health insurance deductibles and co-pays.

The success of this struggle requires that teachers mobilize the widest support, not only among workers in West Virginia, but among educators and workers nationally and internationally. It poses the question of a reorganization of society on a new and higher basis, production for human need, not private profit.

We urge teachers to contact us, subscribe to our WSWS Teacher Newsletter and take up this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact