

West Virginia teachers carry out state-wide strike

Jerry White
23 February 2018

In the first West Virginia teachers strike in nearly three decades, over 20,000 teachers, school bus drivers and other school employees began a two-day state-wide walkout on Thursday. West Virginia teachers, who are among the lowest paid in the nation, are demanding improved wages and an end to rising health care costs imposed by the state-run Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA).

Teachers and other school employees are defying the state's anti-democratic ban on public employee strikes, which carries the threat of fines, mass firings and even jailing. On the eve of the walkout, Attorney General Patrick Morrisey declared that "a work stoppage of any length on any ground is illegal." Morrisey said he would back county school boards and school superintendents seeking back-to-work injunctions.

Teachers in West Virginia are legally prohibited from collective bargaining for wages and benefits, which are left to the whim of a state government notorious for being the pockets of the coal and energy companies.

On Wednesday, Republican Governor Jim Justice, a billionaire coal magnate, signed a bill giving teachers an insulting two percent raise in July, followed by annual one percent increase over the next two years. The bill was backed by Republicans and a significant section of Democrats, who have cynically postured as supporters of the teachers.

While state legislators hypocritically denounced striking teachers for hurting their students, the walkout has the support of working-class parents and students, who joined teachers on picket lines across all 55 state counties. Large contingents of workers and young people participated alongside thousands of teachers in mass protests at the state capital of Charleston.

An estimated 5,000 workers and youth descended on the capitol building, chanting "Enough is enough" and

"Fed up, fired up." Legislators, who have steadfastly opposed teachers' wage and health care demands, cancelled debate on funding for PEIA and public education.

Kay Shirey, a guidance counselor at Eastern Greenbrier Middle School, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We were here 30-years ago fighting the same battles. They keep saying, 'Wait, we will fix this.' We are tired of waiting." (See: "West Virginia teachers demand quality pay, health care")

The strike has exposed the chasm between rank-and-file teachers and the two unions, the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and the smaller American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV), which have long collaborated with the same Democratic and Republican politicians who have starved the public schools of funding. Both unions endorsed Justice, who ran as a Democrat before switching parties. They also backed his predecessor, the current Democratic US Senator Joe Manchin, who also promised and delivered nothing to teachers.

After failing to mollify teachers' anger with one-day strikes in a limited number of counties earlier this month, the unions called the statewide action for Thursday and Friday.

While the unions have floated the idea of resuming "rolling strikes" on a county-by-county basis, AFT-WV President Christine Campbell signaled Friday that the unions might shut down further action or simply ride things out until the legislature recesses on March 10. "We are assessing the situation," Campbell said, according to a report in the *Washington Post*. "We are going to make a determination some time [Friday] on whether or not it's necessary to take additional action and what that action might be."

The unions are seeking to smother the strike as soon

as possible. This was made clear by the presence in West Virginia of national AFT president Randi Weingarten. A fixture in the Democratic Party establishment, Weingarten spent the eight years of the Obama administration shutting down teacher opposition to the president's "school reform" agenda of promoting charter schools and for-profit educational schemes, while the AFT took money from Bill Gates and other enemies of public education.

On Thursday, Weingarten said the first step to ending the walkout by March 10 would be "to not do what the Senate did, which was actually to lower the House proposal." In other words, the AFT bureaucrat (who has a personal income of \$500,000 a year) is in discussions with state Democrats on a plan to restore the lower state house's equally insulting proposal of a five percent wage increase over four years. The unions would then point to this as "movement" and shut the struggle down.

Rank-and-file teachers are pressing for an indefinite statewide strike to win their demands. "I want us to just stay on strike," a teacher from Glen Fork Elementary school who was protesting at the state capitol told the WSWS. "Last time we were out for one day, and they didn't do anything. Now two days. What are they going to do next, three days? We should just stay out until our health care is fixed."

If their struggle is not to be defeated, teachers must take conduct of the strike out of the hands of the unions, by electing rank-and-file strike committees in every school and community. Mass meetings should be called to broaden support for the struggle and mobilize the widest sections of the working class, including all public employees, coal miners, factory workers, and college and high school students.

Workers must reject the lie, peddled by the unions, that their demands can be won by appealing to Democratic and Republican politicians who all have a vested interest in defending the wealth and power of the corporate and financial elite.

The West Virginia strike is a part of a resurgence of the class struggle internationally. After more than a decade of stagnant and declining wages, increased health care costs and soaring inequality, the US is on the eve of a social explosion. Educators are particularly determined to recoup lost wages and defend public education against new attacks being prepared by the

Trump administration and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. Teachers in Pittsburgh, Arizona, New Jersey, Florida, Oklahoma and other areas are pressing for strike action.

The threats of injunctions, fines and firings, and the opposition of both Democrats and Republicans to the demands of teachers, exposes the fact that teachers are engaged in a political struggle. The entire state apparatus is an instrument of the corporate and financial elite, which is determined to make teachers and the entire working class pay to funnel money into Wall Street and the military.

The revival of working class struggle must be linked to the building of a mass political movement of the working class, independent of both big business parties, fighting for a socialist program to meet human needs, not corporate profit.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact