

“We are tired of waiting”

## West Virginia teachers demand quality pay, health care

Our reporters  
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Thousands of teachers, students, public employees and their supporters participated in a demonstration in Charleston, West Virginia on Thursday, the first day of a two-day teacher walkout throughout the state.

Those participating in the rally expressed great determination to oppose a derisory pay increase passed by the West Virginia legislature and the starving of the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA).

The WWS spoke to many of those participating in the rally.

Kay Shirey, a guidance counselor at Eastern Greenbrier Middle School, said, “We were here 30-years ago fighting the same battles. They keep saying, ‘wait we will fix this.’ We are tired of waiting.

“I am fighting for the future of West Virginia. I want the kids to have qualified teachers. We can’t get qualified teachers now. We have over 700 unfilled positions now, and we will have more next year.

“Their solution is to dumb down the standards, and that is hurting the students. For years they have been saying, ‘We have to hold the kids to high standards.’ Now they just want to dumb everything down.”

Ty Braenwich has just started as an 8th grade Social Studies teacher also at Eastern Greenbrier Middle School. “I went to West Virginia University. Out of my class, most of the graduates took jobs in Ohio, Pennsylvania or Virginia. I am the only one who stayed in West Virginia.

“We work hard. It’s not just in the classroom. We are preparing lesson plans, grading papers, getting ready for our day. Yesterday, I worked from 7 am to 6 pm and still took work home with me.

“We are living paycheck to paycheck. Over the summer, I work another job to supplement my income

just to get by.

“I love what I do for all the 125 kids. We should be treated as first class citizens.”

Breanna, who has taught Spanish for two years. “I am here for that,” she said, pointing to a sign being held by her coworker that read, “700+ Vacancies, 48th in pay, can’t afford to stay.”

“The pay is so low that teachers can’t afford to stay in the state. Everyone moves somewhere else. It is so hard for the schools to find teachers because nobody wants to work here or stay here. What is the future if there are no teachers for the children?”

Traci Evans, who has been an English teacher at Calhoun Gilmer Career Center for 14 years, explained that she was out to support all state workers. “I’m here because teachers and all state employees have been treated poorly for too long a time. We all are taking a stand and saying enough is enough.

“We are in a job because we are training the people for all the other jobs, and we don’t get the respect and wages that we deserve. What pay raises we do get are being gobbled up by the increased cost of health care.

“Every year we really get a pay cut. It is making it very difficult to make a living. We are fighting for all public employees, not just the teachers, but the 200,000 state employees who are all having their health insurance cut.

“You just have the upper class, and the rest of us are in the lower class. There is not really a middle class any more. One of our politicians even said that teachers could get second jobs or cut off their internet at their homes. How can you be a teacher without the internet?”

A teacher from Glen Fork Elementary school spoke

about the future of the struggle. “I want us to just stay on strike. 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.

“Many teachers are not going to the doctor now because of the cost. It costs \$40 to see a specialist. I know teachers that are telling their kids that they can’t go to a doctor unless it is really bad.”

Chris, a physical education teacher, said the biggest issue is the underfunding of the PEIA (the Public Employees Insurance Agency), which affects 20,000 people. “The big issue is the premiums and deductibles. If this isn’t fixed, we will be back here in the same spot.

“The 2 percent raise is not worth it, because they raise your insurance rate. I figure that I will get a \$30 weekly raise, but I will be paying an additional \$200 in premiums. It’s a joke.

Amy, a first grade teacher, said, “I’m here to support the students because it is not just about a pay raise for us. There are over 700 vacancies. The legislature’s solution is to lower the requirement for the teachers. That is not the solution.

“I want to support the students and fill these vacancies. It’s not fair to the students. And even they understand that everywhere around us the pay is so much higher. Logically, people are going to leave. We don’t want to have any more vacancies. We need to fill them with qualified people.

Kelly is a school bus driver for Putnam County. “I’m here for the PEIA insurance to be reformed.” Kelly said she wanted to give a voice to the overwhelming support for the strike from state workers.

“I wanted them to see that there are other workers who are affected. There are first responders, EMS drivers, people all over the state are affected. I spoke to people in the Department of Highways and the Department of Transportation who were forbidden to strike.”

Kelly said the students she drives also support the strike. “There’s a program our county called ‘backpack sacks,’ and kids were provided with a lot of provisions since school will be closed for the next two days.”

Isabelle, a bus driver, said a strike was not something they wanted to do. “However, it is the only way to

show we do not agree, because they don’t listen to us. They pushed us to do this.

Jane, a teacher, said, “My issue is PEIA. My husband had a brain tumor and two hip replacements. Insurance is important to us.

“I was involved in the 1990 strike. The issue then was PEIA. They agreed to fund the insurance but didn’t follow through. We went back too soon. Since 2014, they haven’t paid anything to the insurance.”

Paul said everything in the state is about cutting taxes. “Cut taxes, cut taxes, and after a certain point there are no resources to keep the lower people propped up. And ‘trickle down’ doesn’t work.”



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