

“We need an uprising of the people to put a stop to this”

West Virginia teachers call for expansion of their struggle

Lawrence Porter
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On Friday evening, the teachers' unions in West Virginia announced that the two-day strike would be extended to a third day on Monday. The announcement reflected concern by the unions that the immediate shutdown of the strike could result in the struggle of teachers erupting outside of union control.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke with teachers protesting outside the state capitol in Charleston on Friday.

Mark Wilson and Joshua Blair are young teachers. Mark teaches special education at Sissonville High School in Kanawha County.

Mark said he thought the governor and state legislature were stalling in order to wear down the teachers and force them back to work. “It’s pretty clear that they don’t care,” he said. “Their strategy is to wear us down. They promised, but it’s clear they do not want to fund PEIA.

“One thing that is clear, I don’t believe there is no money. All the money is going to the corporations. And young teachers like myself are really being hit hard.”

Mark said he makes \$42,000 a year and has a total of \$68,000 in student loans for his bachelor’s and master’s degrees. “Because the pay is so low, I can’t afford to pay my loans. I have been teaching for seven years, and at this point I’m still paying the interest. It’s just crushing.”

The strike has won wide support from workers across the state. Large numbers of workers and students joined teachers on the picket lines and at protests.

Larry Gray, and his wife who is a teacher spoke to the WSW. Larry, a former union miner, was involved in many strikes in the 80s and 90s.

Recalling the earlier militant struggles, Larry said, “I

was a member of the United Mineworkers [UMWA], and when we went out we stayed out until we got what we needed. We even defied a court injunction. When one mine went out all of the mines went out.”

“[Former UMWA President Richard] Trumka messed things up. He started calling selective strikes rather than everyone going out. After that the company began picking off the workers and closing mines. Many of the plants now are nonunion.

“But my advice to the teachers is to stay out until they get the PEIA fixed. Otherwise they will chip away at the working man. More and more, it’s the rich and the poor. Soon there won’t be a middle class.

“This talk about there not being money is nonsense. They have all of this fracking and natural gas coming out, but they don’t want to tax it.”

Rikki and Ken are state workers who took a day off to join the teachers protest.

“I feel their pain,” said Rikki. “I stand with them all the way. We don’t have a union so we can’t strike, but we face the same issues they are dealing with. We get the same PEIA that they get.”

“I only make \$11.40 an hour,” continued Rikki. “That’s not enough to live on. I not only work this job, I’m also a waitress at a restaurant.”

Many workers noted the fact that while the state was rich in mineral resources, Democratic and Republican politicians refused to levy any substantial taxes on the giant energy companies. Both the AFT-WV and the WVEA have supported a series of Democratic politicians who have done nothing for teachers, including billionaire West Virginia Governor Jim Justice, a Democrat turned Republican.

Ken said, “We are sitting on an underground gas field

that is worth trillions. And yet they say they can't tax it. That money could be used to pay teachers a decent wage and the same for state workers.

"It doesn't matter if it is a Democrat or Republican. All the people in that building are for the big money people. In fact, the governor himself is the owner of one of the largest mines in the state", he said referring to Justice.

"I think people are more and more going to stand up against these things," Ken continued. "They say they can't afford the benefits but there is all of this wealth beneath our feet."

"We need an uprising of the people to put a stop to this."

Holly Norman is a first-year teacher who works with behaviorally challenged kids. "We are here for the kids, and I love my kids, but we also must take care of ourselves."

Holly said she only makes \$35,000 a year and has a total of \$100,000 in student loans. "I can't miss a single payment on my loans for 10 years, otherwise I lose my loan forgiveness.

"One of the things they don't address is what is happening in the classrooms. Classroom sizes are increasing. In one class it went from 18 students to 27. I have 7 kids, but it is a challenge. I have had kids bite me, punch me in the face, hit me. I'll bet not one of the people in the government have had to deal with that. This is what we deal with on a daily basis."



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