

# West Virginia teachers take a stand

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More than 20,000 teachers and public school employees in West Virginia are taking a courageous stand in defense of their interests and those of the entire working class. On Friday, teachers completed the second day of a strike that has shut down schools in all 55 counties in the state. The teachers have defied threats of injunctions, fines and even imprisonment from government officials, who have declared any strike action illegal.

The American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) and the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) announced on Friday that what was originally announced as a two-day strike will be extended by at least one day, to Monday.

The decision of the unions to continue the strike reflects their nervousness over the prospect of the teachers' anger erupting outside of their control, connecting with the opposition of teachers throughout the country and developing into a political movement against both the Democratic and Republican parties. The walkouts began largely spontaneously, with local strikes centered in the southern coal mining counties, culminating in a mass demonstration in Charleston last weekend. It was then that the unions announced the two-day strike as a means of letting off steam while they continued discussions with lawmakers.

Nothing that emerges from such negotiations will meet the demands of the teachers for decent pay and health benefits. Compensation for educators in West Virginia ranks 48th in the country, and the state legislature, with the support of substantial sections of the Democratic Party, passed a derisory pay increase of four percent over three years. This does not even make up for rising health care costs due to underfunding of the Public Employees Insurance Agency, which has resulted in a steady decline in the real income of teachers and other public workers.

The West Virginia teachers' strike is of immense

political significance. It explodes the narrative of the Democratic Party and the upper-middle-class purveyors of identity politics, who view the "white working class" of Appalachia as "privileged" and reactionary. It exposes the inane categorization of US politics as "red states" and "blue states," in which the red (Republican) states are conservative and the blue (Democratic) states are "progressive." The real division in American society, transcending every geographical divide, is by class.

The working class of West Virginia has a long and proud history of militant class struggle, captured by terms such as "Bloody Mingo," the "Battle of Blair Mountain" and the "Matewan Massacre." These traditions, suppressed and dormant for several decades, are reemerging under new conditions of social upheaval.

The significance of the strike, however, extends far beyond West Virginia. It is one expression of a national and international resurgence of class struggle. In its Perspective commentary from June 13 of last year, "Palace coup or class struggle," the WSWS wrote:

The decades-long suppression of the class struggle by the trade union bureaucracy, the Democratic Party and the affluent sponsors of various forms of identity politics is coming to an end. The social counterrevolution of the ruling elites is about to encounter an upsurge of the American working class. The many different forms of social protest—in work places, communities and entire cities—will acquire an ever more distinct working class identity, anti-capitalist orientation and socialistic character. Struggles in individual work places and communities will draw into unified struggle broader sections of the working class.

This prognosis is being confirmed. Among teachers, hostility to the decades-long assault on public education, under both Democrats and Republicans, is reaching a tipping point. Earlier this month, 94 percent of teachers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania voted to authorize strike action. As of Friday, nearly 7,000 teachers in Oklahoma had signed a petition calling for a walkout to demand a \$10,000 raise. Teachers in New Jersey and Minnesota are also threatening strike action.

The conditions facing teachers are common to every section of the working class: declining wages, rising health care costs, historic levels of inequality, the destruction of public and social infrastructure. To this must be added the many malignant consequences of the social crisis in the United States, from the opioid drug epidemic, which killed more than 64,000 people in the US in 2016, to the endless series of mass shootings in US schools. The latest school shooting, in Parkland, Florida on February 14, has sparked demonstrations and protests by students throughout the country.

West Virginia teachers are expressing sentiments that are much more broadly felt. One retired teacher told the WSWS: “I think it’s time for a general strike or protest, nationwide. They’re doing everything they can to loot everything that belongs to the public.”

The resurgence of class struggle, moreover, is developing as an international movement. The first two months of 2018 have seen a wave of protests across Europe and the Middle East, including mass demonstrations in Iran and Tunisia and strikes in Germany, Britain and Greece. Nearly 40,000 lecturers in the UK are currently on strike against attacks on their pensions. Defying threats of fines, 10,000 public school teachers in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia voted 82.5 percent in favor of a strike on Tuesday.

For decades, the ruling class has been given free rein by the trade unions to dismantle entire industries, destroy public infrastructure, wage war and accumulate levels of wealth previously unimaginable. The artificial suppression of the class struggle is the chief factor in the diseased character of American society.

All the filth and reaction of bourgeois politics in the United States has culminated in the Trump administration, which is waging an all-out war on the working class. The Democratic Party expresses the same disease in a different form. Since the inauguration of Trump, it has focused its energies on the

development of a neo-McCarthyite campaign aimed at attributing all manifestations of social unrest to the actions of a foreign enemy.

The forcible entry of the working class into social and political life will upend all the calculations of the capitalist ruling elite. It will expose the absurd theory of the “end of history” and the claim, promoted particularly by the anti-Marxists of the pseudo-left, that the working class is finished as a revolutionary force. The emergence of the working class will create a new social and political dynamic—a way forward out of the dead end into which the capitalist system has led humanity.

The growth of the class struggle inevitably raises fundamental political questions connected to the objective social being of the working class. The fight by workers to defend their most basic rights places them in direct conflict with the capitalist class as a whole and its political instrument, the state. Every separate struggle raises the imperative of forming independent working class organizations, outside of the control of the pro-capitalist trade unions, to link the struggles of different sections of the working class and forge a powerful, unified and global movement.

For socialists, the critical question is to orient ever more forcefully to the working class. It is necessary to aggressively intervene in every manifestation of working class opposition, expand and develop the consciousness of workers, and explain the objective logic of their struggles—what they are fighting against and what they are fighting for. A socialist leadership must be systematically developed in every section of the working class through the expansion of the readership of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the building of the Socialist Equality Party.



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