

Walkout by West Virginia teachers to continue through Monday

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Thousands of West Virginia teachers and other school employees participated in the second day of a statewide walkout Friday, amidst maneuvers between the heads of the teachers' unions and state legislators.

After initially seeking to limit the action to two days, on Friday evening the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and the American Federation of Teachers–West Virginia (AFT-WV) announced that it would continue Monday. The decision expressed the fear that calling off the strike could expose the unions and cause the struggle of teachers to erupt outside of their control.

The walkout by teachers has been carried out in courageous defiance of the threat of legal sanctions by state officials. Under state law, teachers are banned from bargaining over wages and benefits and have no legal right to strike.

Teachers are justly outraged by the paltry pay increase proposed by the Republican-controlled state legislature, which will do nothing to alleviate their abysmally low wages. A bill passed by both houses of the legislature Wednesday, with substantial support from Democrats, calls for an insulting two percent pay increase in 2019 followed by one percent in each of the next two years. Some Democrats have called for a slightly larger but still derisory pay increase.

Teachers rightly fear that higher health care deductibles and co-pays will eat up whatever gains are made in wages.

On Friday, the state's billionaire governor, Democrat-turned-Republican Jim Justice, declared that teachers would get nothing more. "When's enough enough?" he arrogantly declared. "Our teachers need to be in the classroom. The Legislature has spoken, and I've signed it into law. Our teachers need to be in the classroom, and our kids need to be in school, and our families

don't need to be having to stay home from work in order to be able to take care of their terrible disruption."

In fact, the struggle of teachers has won the support of broad sections of the working class, who recognize in their struggle a fight to defend public education and the interests of all workers.

The continuation of the strike will be met by greater resistance from the state. On Thursday and Friday, school districts announced the formal closure of schools prior to the walkout, giving the strike greater legal sanction. This was no doubt done in careful consultation with the unions and the government.

If the strike is continued under conditions in which the schools are formally open, it will likely be accompanied by court injunctions and fines. This will be used by the unions as a rationale for shutting it down. According to the Charleston Gazette-Mail, the public schools superintendent of Kanawha County (which includes Charleston) has not yet decided whether to close schools on Monday.

In a completely inadequate gesture, the legislature this week voted to freeze health care rates for the next fiscal year by transferring \$29 million from the state's "Rainy Day Fund." However, the director of the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA) has said that \$50-\$70 million is needed to keep the program stable.

In the most recent political maneuver, on Thursday the West Virginia House passed a bill to dedicate 20 percent of any general revenue surplus toward stabilizing the PEIA. Teachers are highly skeptical of the measure, since the amount could vary depending on the size of the surplus, if any. That did not stop Christine Campbell, president of the AFT-WV from calling it "a good start."

The unions have not advanced any specific demands.

They are grasping for some sign of movement on the part of the legislature to justify calling off the struggle. In relation to health care costs, Dale Lee, president of the WVEA indicated the unions' willingness to collaborate with the legislature in working out a formula that could be used to justify ending the protests. "We're asking them to put a task force together—and that we have seats at the table—so that we can discuss how to come up with solutions to PEIA."

West Virginia teachers must not allow the unions to channel their struggle behind maneuvers with various state Democratic politicians, who are in the pockets of the coal and natural gas corporations and who have demonstrated their hostility to the working class.

If their struggle is not to be betrayed, teachers must take the initiative by organizing rank-and-file and neighborhood committees in every school and community independent of the WVEA and AFT-WV.

These committees should fight to broaden the struggle of teachers and school employees by mobilizing all sections of the working class. They should link their fight with teachers in Pittsburgh, where the union is stringing out negotiations despite an overwhelming strike authorization. In Oklahoma, a petition calling for a walkout and a \$10,000 raise has received 7,000 signatures as of Friday.

There is growing anger and opposition among teachers and other workers throughout the United States and internationally. A determined struggle by teachers in West Virginia will win widespread support.



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