

“The politicians don’t want to fund education; they’d rather fund war”

Teachers speak out on the struggle in West Virginia

A reporting team
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“This struggle reminds me of the conditions of the labor movement in the 1800s,” Debbie, a West Virginia teacher, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “This movement today allows us to see where we have come from. While there are differences, there was enormous poverty among the workers back then, and they began a struggle.

Debbie was speaking about the strike of West Virginia teachers, which is continuing into a third day today. Teachers are demanding a significant pay increase and an end to soaring health care costs.

“Have you heard of the Battle of Blair Mountain? Workers were living in tents. The Corporations sent a train of strikebreakers and used Gatling guns. 15,000 workers began a march against the corporations. This is the only state where the Air Force was sent to bomb the workers who were fighting for their rights.

“I’m afraid this could become like Wisconsin,” she said, referring to the defeat of teachers and public sector workers in 2011 after the unions corralled mass struggles behind the recall of Republican Scott Walker. Debbie said that she was of the opinion that neither the Democrats nor Republicans speak for the working class.

“I’m also afraid they can outlast us. Tomorrow I believe they will file a court injunction to try to force the teachers back to work, then there will be a series of votes. My county will vote no, but I don’t know how it will go statewide. I agree, there needs to be a struggle of all the working people.”

Zelda, a cook in the Mingo County schools, told the WSWs, “I heard [Governor] Jim Justice say several times that there is no money for teachers and the PEIA [Public Employee Insurance Agency]. If there is no money for a pay raise for teachers or the PEIA, then how could the state afford to give these tax cuts to these businesses?

“I think he just represents the businesses. I think if he truly

wanted to help the people, he could. I think he is for the businesses, and what will help him in his personal life, not the people and his state.”

Zelda pointed out that Jim Justice hadn’t paid his taxes, observing, “If that was us, we would be in trouble.” She continued, “My fear is that these gas companies will, just like the coal companies, take our resources and not give the state what it deserves.

“Our strike is getting nationwide and worldwide attention. I think the majority of people support the teachers and the fight to get some better conditions.

“If we don’t stand up, they will just keep taking away and taking away. The PEIA is the main thing, but they want to also take away our seniority. They could come in and say, ‘We don’t like the way you have been cooking’ and just bump me down.

“I think we should stand in solidarity until we get something done. I think we have come this far, we have drawn attention, we should stay 55 [counties] united and continue until we get something resolved.”

Another West Virginia teacher emphasized the significance of the stand they were taking. “This is beyond a state worker strike. To me, this is a national movement. We are dealing with the bigger picture with the government. Where does the money go? People need to be accountable.

“Voices need to continue to be heard. I know a lot of people around the country are watching West Virginia to see what we are doing, and I heard Kentucky is ready to take action. We have a lot of support.”

The WSWs spoke with educators eager to express their support for the ongoing struggle in West Virginia.

A Detroit Public Schools Community District teacher directed her remarks to striking West Virginia teachers. “You should have courage because you have so many people supporting you.” However, she cautioned on the need

to examine the treacherous role of the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and their local affiliates.

“You have to think in terms of the union is not on your side and how you can organize outside of the union. The union doesn’t own us.

“We need to think outside the union and Democratic Party. That’s what we need to do because we’re in the class struggle together—teachers and the entire working class and the poor. We’re all struggling against capitalism and the impact it has on us and the poor and working-class students we’re trying to teach.”

She referred to the betrayal of Detroit teachers. “We had a two sickouts in 2016 which were independent of the union. The school administration knew we weren’t afraid to stay out. We got the support of parents and other workers and students,” she said describing the rolling sickouts in 2015-16 that were organized in defiance of the union as well as the Democratic Party mayor and city council politicians.

“AFT President Randi Weingarten came into my classroom to tell me she understood how bad things were. But she is not in solidarity with teachers. In our situation, the union strung us along. Then they called off the sickouts with lots of promises and threats. In the end, the Detroit Public Schools got what it wanted, such as a terrible new health plan that was a lot worse than what we had.

“The union has sold out so many struggles. Since Michigan has a right-to-work law, a lot of teachers don’t pay union dues. In fact, if you don’t pay dues for a couple of years and then decide to come back into the union, you can’t unless you pay all of the dues you didn’t pay. At a meeting in September with all of the teachers, the school superintendent said he was working with the union leaders. It’s just like UAW-Ford in the auto plants.” She concluded, “So how could the union be working for us?”

Linda, an elementary school teacher in Arizona, said, “I support the West Virginia teachers and all those fighting cuts in education—all those places where they say there’s ‘no money’ and there is. In West Virginia, for example, they are sitting on coalmines.

“Arizona is one of the lowest-paying states in the country. I think we are 47th, right after West Virginia. The federal government under Obama cut education, including Title I funding. And the state cut money.

“We had a mini-strike in my district. First, they told us we were \$3 million in debt; now its \$5 million. The state has threatened receivership. The school board president proposed the teachers take a five percent base salary cut for the rest of the year, including what we’ve already been paid—in other words, retroactive for the whole school year. I personally would have lost over \$2,000 over the next six

paychecks. I’m already struggling because of medical debt.

“Teachers held a sickout, then they protested with picket signs in front of the school board, and parents and students backed us up. The school board ended up voting down the proposal because of public support. But now the state is proposing to close two schools and cut staff down to the bare minimum. This means getting rid of reading specialists, no art, no music, no library and no prep time. Also we are running out of money in March, they are meeting on Monday to discuss what they take this year. They might propose another pay cut.

“I think it’s great what West Virginia teachers are doing. All teachers should support what’s happening there. You don’t want to hurt the children, but what’s going on is hurting them. If we lose funding, then we lose teachers, and the children lose a decent education system. We’re talking about the future and the livelihoods of the children.

“The politicians don’t want to fund education; they’d rather fund war. If you privatize education, you are moving to having an uneducated population which has nothing, while the wealthy can have money, power and education. In Arizona, we are low-paid, and now you don’t even need to be certified any more. No training? What does that do to children? They are getting rid of the middle class, they want a wealthy and the poor and there’s no mobility. We already have well-educated people living in their cars.

“People may think there’s a difference between the Democrats and Republicans, but how many millionaires are there in Congress? Whose interests are they looking out for?”

Quinton, a teaching aide from New York, said, “Teachers are doing a good thing in West Virginia. But the unions, as they are, will try to make a deal with the Democrats and get the teachers to stop any actual strike. The call for a rank-and-file committee makes sense.

“Everything’s so disparate, and we’re all so spread out. Flint, West Virginia, we all have to stand together. We just have to a unified idea what we want to accomplish. We’re going up against entrenched systems of power. We need an antiwar movement. We’re fighting against an establishment that worships war and money, and those are two very bad things.”



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