

West Virginia teachers strike at the crossroads

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More than 20,000 West Virginia teachers and other school employees are continuing their statewide strike today to demand improved wages and an end to crushing health care costs imposed by the state's Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA).

Governor Jim Justice, a billionaire coal magnate, and the Republican-controlled state legislature have remained intransigent. Last week, with support of a significant number of state Democrats, Justice signed a bill giving educators an insulting two percent wage increase in July, followed by one percent annual raises over the next two years.

Teachers, who are currently 48th in the nation in pay, have rejected the state's ultimatum and are pressing to expand the first teachers' strike since 1990. The West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and the smaller American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV), which initially announced a two-day strike for last Thursday and Friday, were forced to extend it to a third day Monday.

Behind the scenes, officials from the state and national teacher unions, along with the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the West Virginia AFL-CIO, are frantically working with state Democrats to find some way to dissipate the anger of teachers and impose some miserable agreement. The union chiefs and their Democratic Party allies fear the militant struggle of teachers could trigger a far broader movement of workers against stagnant and declining wages, rising living costs and the decimation of essential social services.

Justice—who ran as a Democrat with the full backing of the WVEA, AFT-WV and UMW, before switching back to the Republican Party—has thus far avoided any legal confrontation with the teachers. Under the state's antidemocratic laws, public employees are barred from striking and could be subject to fines or even jail if they defy back-to-work orders.

On Sunday night, the West Virginia Department of Education announced that school districts in all the state's 55 counties had canceled classes Monday, including in Berkeley and Jefferson counties, which had initially threatened to reopen schools. In Kanawha County, however, district officials ordered school employees in nonteaching positions who have supported the strike, including school bus drivers, custodians, aides, maintenance workers and secretaries, to report to work. This could be the first test by the authorities to use disciplinary action or legal measures to break the unity of the strike.

The governor's attorney general, Patrick Morrissey, has already declared the strike illegal and offered his backing to county school boards and school superintendent seeking back-to-work injunctions. In 1990, the WVEA and AFT-WV capitulated to the injunction obtained by Democratic Governor Gaston Caperton and ended the 11-day strike based on worthless pledges by the Democratic-controlled state legislature to call a special session to address school funding.

The unions are once again parading state Democrats before teachers and claiming they are their friends. On Sunday night, the unions held impotent candlelight vigils to pray that the governor and legislature would listen. At a vigil in Braxton County, AFT-WV officials brought out Democratic state legislators, including Senator Doug Facemire, Delegate Brent Boggs and Delegate Mike Caputo.

This is a sure sign that the unions are preparing to torpedo the struggle. Whatever their rhetoric, the Democrats are no less the tools of the coal, natural gas and energy conglomerates than the Republicans. They steadfastly oppose any measures that would impinge on the profits and prerogatives of the corporate and financial elite.

Democrats have controlled the governor's office for 32

of the last 40 years.

Between 1992 and 1996, and again from 2001 to 2014, the Democrats controlled the governor's mansion and both houses of the state legislature. Their promises to improve teachers' wages and conditions have amounted to nothing.

On the national level, the Obama administration spearheaded the attack on public education. His pro-corporate "school reform" agenda used tests to scapegoat teachers for the consequences of decades of bipartisan budget cutting and the growth of inequality, closed hundreds of public schools and sharply expanded charter schools and other for-profit schemes.

The unions back the Democrats, because the Democrats tend to favor utilizing the services of the unions to impose austerity and other attacks on the working class. This "seat at the table" enables officials from the AFT, NEA and other unions to gain federal, state and local government posts and lucrative business opportunities, from pension fund investments to running charter school operations and collecting dues from miserably paid charter school workers.

The unions have called a rally for Monday afternoon on the state capitol steps, which will include WVEA President Dale Lee, AFT-WV President Christine Campbell and UMW President Cecil Roberts. The inclusion of the UMW official is designed to give the impression that the unions are mobilizing broader support behind the teachers, but the reality is the exact opposite.

Far from speaking for rank-and-file miners, the UMW is nothing but a bureaucratic shell, which long ago disassociated itself from anything to do with the militant traditions of West Virginia miners. Roberts, who with 23 years at the top post seems destined to be president-for-life, embodies the transformation of the UMW into a tool of the corporations. He was the right-hand man of Richard Trumka (now AFL-CIO president) when the latter imposed his "selective strike" policy on the miners, overturning the long-standing tradition of shutting down all the mines if any operator refused to sign a contract.

This led to the bitter defeat of one strike after another, from AT Massey to Pittston, and gave the coal bosses the green light to victimize militant miners, overturn the gains won by generations of miners and use the bankruptcy courts to loot the pensions of retirees.

It is significant that the last teachers' strike in 1990 followed just months after rank-and-file miners rebelled against Trumka and Roberts and launched a wildcat strike to defend the Pittston strikers. When Caperton threatened

striking teachers with mass fines, the UMW explicitly rejected any action to defend them, with its spokesman saying, "We are not advocating a work stoppage. The state doesn't have any money now. If we struck, it would lose millions of dollars. We don't want to compound the problem. We supported Caperton in the 1988 elections because he was the best man at the time. We haven't changed our position."

Campaigning for Justice in 2016, Roberts said, "Jim is one of the good coal operators."

Last week, Democratic Delegate Mike Caputo, the minority whip in the House of Delegates and a former UMW international representative, told the *West Virginia Metro News* that "staying disciplined" was the most important thing for teachers and school employees. The key to winning the strike, he said, was following the dictates of the unions even if they ordered them back to work and resumed so-called rolling walkouts limited to individual counties. Far from winning the strike such a course of action, which would undermine the unity of workers and leave smaller numbers of striking teachers vulnerable to retaliation, would guarantee its defeat.

Throughout the US and internationally, opposition to austerity and inequality is growing, particularly among teachers. In recent weeks, thousands of teachers in Oklahoma, Arizona, Minnesota, Pittsburgh and other states and cities have expressed their determination to strike for improved wages and to defend public education.

Instead of fruitless appeals to big-business politicians, West Virginia teachers must appeal to their fellow educators and fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class to back their struggle. To take this forward, teachers and school employees should elect rank-and-file strike committees at every school and community to organize mass meetings and demonstrations, and to rally the widest support for the strike and against any threats to use strikebreaking injunctions.

This must be combined with a new political strategy to build a mass socialist movement of the working class to break the corporate dictatorship over economic and political life and reorganize society to meet human needs, not private profit.



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