

West Virginia teachers defiant as unions, governor scramble to end walkouts

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More than 20,000 West Virginia teachers and other school employees are continuing their statewide walkout for a fourth day today, demanding pay increases and an end to rising health care costs through the state's Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA).

The struggle is at a turning point. That the teachers' strike—the first in West Virginia since 1990—has occurred at all, much less extended for the second time after the unions' planned two-day walkout last week, is testament to the courage and militancy of the teachers and their determination to stop decades of declining living standards.

Even though the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) have sought to limit and demobilize the struggle at every step, teachers are justifiably proud that the walkouts have shut schools across all the state's 55 counties, expressed in the use of the hashtags #55proud and #shutWVDown.

From the standpoint of the teachers, the unions' strategy of collaborating with state Democrats and appealing to the state legislature for relief has proven to be a complete failure. The state's billionaire governor, Jim Justice, and the Republican-controlled state legislature, with the backing of a significant section of Democrats, have offered an insulting four percent raise over three years, even though teachers are near the bottom in pay in the nation.

Legislators from both corporate-controlled parties have refused to take an additional penny from the coal, natural gas, petrochemical and pharmaceutical companies that dominate the state economy and control the entire political establishment. Instead, teachers are now being threatened with strikebreaking injunctions, which could result in huge fines, firings or even mass arrests if teachers defy back-to-work orders.

During a series of town hall meetings and tweets

yesterday, Justice reiterated his opposition to any significant increases in pay or funding for the PEIA. If the state's economy rebounds as expected, the governor claimed, he would like to come back with perhaps four percent pay raises in coming years. To pay teachers more now, he insisted, would “blow up” the state budget and would be “very, very dumb.” As far as the PEIA is concerned, the governor told striking teachers, “You don't have a god's chance in the planet in fixing that in 10 days,” before the regular session of the state legislature expires.

This is not because of any lack of resources. On the contrary, the corporations have extracted vast profits from exploiting the “billion-dollar coalfield” and generations of coal miners and other workers.

A one-time 75 percent tax on the governor's fortune of \$1.73 billion would provide every teacher with a \$6,500 annual raise for the next decade. The governor, who owes \$2 million in unpaid taxes on his coal operations in Kentucky, largely stolen from the state's public schools, embodies all the greed of America's ruling class. Behind his arrogance stand the giant corporations and banks determined to implement a further distribution of wealth to the rich.

Confounded over teachers asserting their rights to decent living standards and quality schools, the governor resorted to threats. “I love you,” Justice condescendingly told teachers at Wheeling High School, “but I'm not happy with you. You should be appreciative of where you are,” he said, before instructing them, “You need to be back in the classroom. The kids need to be back in the classroom.”

Up until this point, Justice and the state legislature have relied on the unions to dissipate opposition and end the strike. Having failed to rein in the teachers in this way, state officials are raising the stakes with threats of court injunctions.

Today, the West Virginia state Board of Education, an unelected body composed primarily of appointees of the governor, will meet to discuss whether to seek a court injunction to enforce the state's reactionary ban on public employee strikes. "If that's the route, everyone will be in school Wednesday," State Superintendent of Schools Steven Paine told a local newspaper. "We believe our employees will follow the injunction and come back to school."

While preparing this attack, Justice sought to provide union officials a cover to get teachers back to work, saying he would convene a special session of the state legislature and appoint a "task force," including union officials, to "work on a solution to the PEIA and all your education needs." Union officials used a similar worthless pledge made by Democratic Governor Gaston Caperton to shut down the 11-day strike in 1990. Nearly 30 years later, there has been no solution to the funding crisis.

During an afternoon rally at the state capitol in Charleston, WVEA President Dale Lee and AFT-WV leader Christine Campbell reiterated their pathetic appeals to the governor and state legislators to bring the unions to the "table" and cut a deal.

"We challenge the House leader, the Senate leader and the governor to bring us to the table today," Campbell told the crowd. "We are ready. We are willing." Earlier in the day, Lee said, "We had a meeting with the House and Senate leadership this morning, making some progress."

Every union official who spoke Tuesday, including United Mine Workers President Cecil Roberts, endorsed Justice for governor in 2016, just as the unions have backed every Democrat who has sat in the governor's mansion for 32 of the last 40 years. Justice was elected as a Democrat before switching to the Republican Party last year, in the process exposing the fraud of the supposed conflict between the two parties.

While the Democrats have employed the services of the unions to suppress opposition, teachers, coal miners and all workers have suffered a terrible decline.

Claims about "progress" are aimed at disarming teachers and preparing a sellout of the strike. The governor and the legislature are doubling down on their refusal to bend to the will of teachers and are threatening to use strikebreaking measures. As far as the unions are concerned, they would welcome a ploy such as an injunction to give them an excuse to send teachers back to work.

The strike has revealed the irreconcilable conflict between the teachers, who speak for the whole working

class, on the one hand, and the entire political establishment—Democrats, Republicans, the unions, the news media—on the other, which speak for the capitalist class. Teachers are involved in a political battle over whose class interests should prevail and how society's resources are to be allocated.

A successful struggle requires mobilizing the broadest sections of the working class: teachers throughout the US, including Pittsburgh teachers scheduled to strike this Friday, coal miners, factory workers, public-sector and health care workers, along with college and high school students.

Rather than squandering time and energy on fruitless appeals to the powers that be, rank-and-file teachers should appeal to their class brothers and sisters throughout the US and around the world who face the same conditions and are fighting the same enemies. All sections of the working class must come to the defense of the teachers in West Virginia.

The *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* calls on West Virginia teachers to elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions and mobilize the working class to oppose all strikebreaking injunctions.

These committees must oppose all efforts by the unions to shut the strike down or reduce it to impotent "rolling strikes" on a county-by-county basis, which would weaken the unity of teachers and leave the vulnerable to legal attacks. Teachers should assert the right to vote on any agreement reached by the unions and decide themselves whether to go back work.

This must be combined with the development of a powerful political movement of the working class, independent of both big business parties, to unite every section of workers, black and white, native-born and immigrant, in a common struggle against capitalism and for genuine social equality, that is, for socialism.



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