

The revolt of the West Virginia teachers

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The strike of 30,000 West Virginia teachers and public school employees, now entering its seventh day, requires the urgent and active support of the entire working class. The issues on which the teachers are fighting are universal: declining wages, deteriorating social infrastructure, the attack on public education, growing social inequality and rising health care costs.

The teachers' repudiation of the agreement worked out behind closed doors by the trade unions and the state's billionaire governor, Jim Justice, is a blow to the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and their state affiliates. From the beginning of the struggle, the unions have sought to suppress, limit and redirect opposition behind the Democratic Party and fruitless appeals to state legislators. These maneuvers culminated in the deal with Justice, which failed to meet any of the basic demands of the teachers, coupled with an order to return to work.

On Wednesday, teachers held impromptu meetings in the state capitol and decided to reject the call for an end to their struggle. County-by-county votes in every school district ended with the same result: the strike will continue; the schools will remain closed.

The central demand of teachers is for full funding of the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA), which manages health care for teachers and public employees. The effort to place an ever greater share of health care costs on the backs of workers is part of a national policy, supported by both Democrats and Republicans. There is a deliberate effort to reduce the life expectancy of the working class through the restriction of access to health care—a campaign that assumes a particularly catastrophic form in Appalachia, a center of the social crisis-fueled opioid drug epidemic.

Tremendous pressure is being brought to bear upon the teachers. The union bureaucracy is counting on threats of fines and injunctions from the state,

combined with further maneuvers in the state legislature, to force an end to the strike. Whatever its immediate outcome, however, the strike marks the beginning of an upsurge of the class struggle in the United States.

The events in West Virginia coincide with many signs of growing working-class militancy in the United States. There are calls for strikes among teachers in Arizona, Oklahoma, Dallas, Pittsburgh and Minneapolis, along with bus drivers in Oklahoma. A strike authorization vote will be held among Los Angeles school cafeteria workers, bus drivers and custodians on Monday. Hundreds of Frontier telecommunication workers in West Virginia may strike after their contract expires on Saturday. Autoworkers have called for the nullification of contracts forced through by union officials who were taking bribes from company executives.

Beyond the borders of the United States, there have been strikes this year of metalworkers in Germany and Turkey, airline workers in France and university lecturers in the UK. In the Czech Republic, Skoda autoworkers are threatening to strike. Protests by workers have erupted in Iran, Tunisia, Morocco, Greece and other countries.

The emergence of the class struggle raises basic political issues. First, it refutes the claim, promoted by the Democratic Party and the middle-class organizations that surround it, that the fundamental divisions in society are along race and gender.

The workers in Appalachia—consigned by the Democrats to the “basket of deplorables” and slandered as racist and reactionary—are fighting over class issues that transcend all other divisions. Not surprisingly, the strike has been virtually ignored by the organizations of the pseudo-left, viscerally hostile to the collective struggles of workers, which contradict the race-gender-sexuality framework of their politics.

Second, the growth of resistance places workers in direct conflict with the trade union apparatus, which for decades has worked to suppress any opposition to exploitation.

Just one day before the revolt of the West Virginia teachers, a lawyer for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees explicitly articulated the principle upon which the unions operate. In oral arguments before the Supreme Court in the case of *Janus v. AFSCME*, David Frederick declared that “union security is the tradeoff for no strikes.” Without financial mechanisms to guarantee the stability of the unions, he said, there would be “an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country.”

Far from being “workers’ organizations,” the unions are critical mechanisms for the suppression of the class struggle. A movement to defend the interests of workers requires the formation of new organizations—rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees, democratically controlled and directed by the workers themselves.

Third, every separate struggle raises the imperative for extending its base of support and involving broader sections of the working class. In West Virginia, the threat of fines and injunctions must be countered through a mobilization of coal miners, state employees, factory workers, health care workers and students and youth. The need to counter the ruling class and its agencies inexorably raises the demand for a general strike.

Fourth, the struggles of workers place them in direct conflict not only with one or another employer, but with the Democratic and Republican parties and the entire state apparatus—the political instruments of the capitalist ruling class. This conflict is immediate in West Virginia, where the wages and benefits of teachers are determined not by contractual negotiations, but by legislative action.

The struggles of all sections of the working class raise the same basic issue: Who shall rule? Whose interests will determine social and economic policy? Those of the corporate and financial elite that controls both big business parties, or those of the vast mass of the population, the workers who produce all of society’s wealth but are everywhere exploited and oppressed? Contained in the logic of every class struggle is the necessity for the conquest of political

power by the working class and the overthrow of the capitalist profit system.

In its statement last year, “Palace coup or class struggle,” the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that alongside the increasingly bitter conflicts within the capitalist ruling elite, centered on issues of foreign policy, an “altogether different conflict is developing—between the ruling class and the working class, the broad mass of the population, which is suffering various forms of social distress and is completely excluded from political life.”

This conflict is now beginning to erupt into the open. The emergence of working class struggle in the United States, the center of world capitalism and imperialism, will upend politics internationally. It will disrupt all the calculations and plans of the capitalist ruling elite. It will immensely weaken the influence of national chauvinism and foster a sense of international class solidarity. It will create a new pole of attraction for masses of workers looking for a way to fight inequality, oppression, imperialist war and authoritarianism.

Despite the efforts of government and corporate censors, the *World Socialist Web Site* has won a mass audience among teachers in West Virginia. Our call for the repudiation of the sellout in West Virginia has reached thousands of teachers throughout the state. The task of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality is to broaden support for the teachers among all sections of the working class, raise the class consciousness of the striking workers, clarify the political issues raised by the struggle, and explain the connection between this strike and the struggle against capitalism and for socialism, not only in the United States but throughout the world.



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