

Defiant West Virginia teachers denounce union efforts to sell out strike

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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with teachers, students and public school employees in the state capital of Charleston, West Virginia on Thursday, as 30,000 workers remained on strike across the state in defiance of the unions' demand that they return to work.

Workers denounced the blatant efforts by the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) to shut down the strike without a vote, and without any agreement on the central demand by workers for a funding commitment for the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA) healthcare coverage.

A teacher from Boone County, a coal mining region in southern West Virginia, said: "We were sold out. The union thought we would be happy with their deal, but when they came out of the press conference with the governor to announce it Tuesday night, there was booing. The union leaders didn't realize how angry we are about the PEIA."

His wife added: "We're both teachers. We are paying \$220 a month in premiums and when they raise the premiums, it will add another \$187, almost doubling our cost. In 2016, Boone County cut our pay. We lost \$4,800 apiece and dental care. We're driving an old van with 187,000 miles and we're living paycheck to paycheck, and sometimes not making it. If it wasn't for my mother, we wouldn't have had a Christmas."

Her husband added: "This is a grassroots movement and the union is upset. There is plenty of natural gas money that could be used to pay for insurance. You can't tell me I walked on the picket line for \$2,000 when that's going to be taken away anyway. It's already \$100 for emergency room visit, \$50 for a primary care doctor and \$40 for specialist, and that's going up. We tell our kids, 'Don't ask to go the doctor

unless you're really sick.'"

Lisa, a teacher from north Marion County, said, "We were raised in the coalfields and we're not scared of injunctions like our union leaders. The teachers weren't scared when [Democratic] Governor [Gaston] Caperton used an injunction in 1990."

"I grew up in Idamay, near the site of the Farmington disaster in 1968, where 78 coal miners were killed. My family knew a lot of the men who died. I grew up in a coal camp duplex.

"On Wednesday morning, the teachers in Marion said, 'We're not going back, who's going to stand with us?' All the teachers and school employees held a county meeting and the union building rep was there. He said, 'Let's trust [WVEA President Dale] Lee and [AFT-WV President Christine] Campbell and see what they work out.' We said, 'We don't trust them.' Up to now this has been a work stoppage with the support of the superintendents and adding paid days onto the end of the year for the days we miss. As early as tomorrow this could go to a real strike with picket lines, nobody crossing and no pay.

"The AFT says we should be happy that the union leaders are going onto [Governor Jim] Justice's Task Force for the PEIA. But if people you don't trust sit on a task force, you're still not going to trust them."

Nic, 17, is in his final year of high school, and wants to become a teacher after graduating. "I wanted to come and support the teachers," he said. "They hardly pay them anything. Their healthcare is terrible now. The government tries to blame the students for the problem. They say we drop out too much, or we've gotten dumber. Basically like it's our fault, even though they don't give us enough money. We don't have enough staff at school. The floor is usually dirty. We don't have soap. There's no toilet paper.

“The union leaders said the strike was over. I wonder about them calling off the strike and whether the government had something over them. The union said they had a deal, but the deal isn’t done. The state board even took the government website down when people started canceling the schools so that the other teachers wouldn’t know. The superintendent had said he fully expected all 55 counties to be at school tomorrow, then they started panicking and took the website down.”

Debby, a retired school teacher with 34 years’ service, came to support the strike. She explained: “I walked in 1990. We got the 5 percent raise then, but we didn’t get the other things promised. And by then we had already gone back to work. Now we have to learn: You stay out until you get what you want. Hopefully, the teachers will stay out. A lot of the teachers are older and know what it means. They know what we didn’t get last time and how hard we fought. If they put an injunction on us, maybe workers will go back. But if we all go out, all 55 counties, then I think we can get what we want. But if we don’t keep strong, and stay out, we won’t.

“I was very disappointed about the union. I don’t know what they’re thinking. I’m not the higher-ups, so I don’t know. I’m just proud of the people who said: ‘No, we don’t care what you say. This is wrong. We’re staying out.’ So that just shows how much determination the people of West Virginia have.”

Debby explained that although she has retired, she is burdened with continuing high medical healthcare costs. “I’m already spending \$300 a month on health insurance for myself. It could have been \$600 per month if I had worked for slightly less time. I don’t earn much; it is leaving me with not much at all. So I’m here fighting for PEIA. I’m fighting for my friends. I don’t think they realize how important this is. In the end, when they’re retired, and things are set, you have to keep your healthcare costs down.”

Linda, who taught for 12 years in Virginia and another 23 years in West Virginia, said: “The unions sold us out yesterday. On Tuesday night [when the AFT announced an end to the strike], everybody was saying: ‘No! Nothing is a done deal. We want some guarantees, not just lip service anymore.’”

She opposed the perspective promoted by the union of appealing to Democrats and Republicans in the state government. “The legislators represent big business,” she said. “Many of them represent themselves. They

own oil and gas. They’re not willing to give up any of the severance tax, which would easily fund PEIA and the raises. They won’t sacrifice their money for the greater good. There’s plenty of money. The Democrats have been in for years and did nothing to address the PEIA problem, to address the wages problem.

“It makes me think of the teachers who are not here today, for a lot of them it is because they have gone back home to feed the schoolkids. In my county, the teachers put in their own money to buy food and provide food for the kids. A lot of us, when we had the meeting in Charleston, they passed a hat around and we put money in. In this country, that should not happen. No child should be without food.”



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