

# All West Virginia schools closed today as teachers' rebellion continues

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The insurgent movement of teachers and other school employees in West Virginia continued Friday, with more than 30,000 public education workers staying off the job and forcing the closure of schools throughout the state's 55 counties. Despite the efforts of the unions and the Democrats and Republicans to shut down the strike, the movement is gaining momentum with public school students joining protests at the state Capitol in Charleston today.

After being forced to call a statewide strike last Thursday and Friday that was extended to Monday and Tuesday, the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) abruptly announced that they had reached an agreement with the state's billionaire governor, Jim Justice, on Tuesday night. WVEA President Dale Lee, AFT-WV President Christine Campbell and West Virginia School Service Personnel Association (WVSSPA) President Joe White then ordered their members to return to work Thursday after a "cooling-off period" Wednesday, without even allowing workers to vote.

Union officials hailed the governor's flimsy promise to get the state legislature to approve a one-time 5 percent raise and appoint a bipartisan task force, including union officials, to propose a solution to the long-underfunded Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA). This outraged striking teachers and other school workers who have been facing crushing healthcare costs as the state shifts the expense of substandard medical coverage onto workers' backs. Strikers insisted they would not return to work without a long-term solution to the PEIA.

Union officials hoped to use the "cooling-off period" Wednesday to badger and intimidate workers into giving up their struggle. Lee, Campbell and White

stood side-by-side at the Capitol Wednesday and told workers they should return to work. Addressing school bus drivers, custodians and other school workers online later in the evening, White threatened that they would be hit with a legal injunction if they did not return to work: "The last thing we want is legal action taken that could harm our members. We are asking you to give your leadership time in our effort to get this [accomplished]."

The unions also called conference calls where, in addition to the injunction threat, officials claimed that teachers would lose public support if they pressed ahead with the strike. Rank-and-file educators, well aware of the popular support they have won for taking this courageous stand, rejected this argument out of hand. According to reports, school workers in several counties used different venues—on the picket lines, in meetings held in local areas and online—to vote to remain on strike, despite efforts by WVEA and AFT officials to prevent such votes.

"Lee and Campbell said we should go back Thursday based on a promise of the politicians," Brittany, a high school teacher from Gilmer County, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "They made a mistake by making Wednesday a cooling-off day. We got together and got organized. A lot of us were deflated but we came to the Capitol and when we got there we began networking with other teachers. A group of Boone County teachers were meeting, and we listened in.

"On Wednesday night, the AFT held a conference call. Teachers were asking them a lot of questions like what if the legislators say they don't have the money to fund the PEIA. We said we're not going back to work until they fund it. We voted on the picket line to stay on strike.

"The union leaders said we'd lose public support if

we kept striking. We aren't afraid of that because we're on the picket lines at seven in the morning and we see the support we're getting. People are bringing us ponchos, firewood and food. They're telling us, 'Stay on strike until you win.' If we were to shut down the strike, and then restart like Lee said, that's how you'd lose support. We have the momentum on our side now."

The rebellion by rank-and-file teachers and school employees took the political establishment by surprise. The *Wheeling Intelligencer* noted, "West Virginia Superintendent of Schools Steven Paine issued a statement earlier on Wednesday stating, 'My expectation is that all public schools in West Virginia will be in session on Thursday, March 1, 2018.'

"Hancock County Superintendent Tim Woodward initially opted to call a two-hour delay, but an hour later, he found himself canceling school," the newspaper noted, quoting Woodward saying, "I have no bus drivers, cooks or custodians. They're going against their union leadership."

About a thousand teachers and other school employees flooded into the state Capitol Thursday as the state senate debated Governor Justice's 5 percent proposal. The previous day, the House of Delegates, which is also controlled by the Republicans, approved the deal 98-1. State Senate President Mitch Carmichael, however, tabled any discussion on the raise and sent the legislation to the Senate Finance Committee to change it and focus solely on the question of funding the PEIA. Carmichael has previously advocated removing money from already inadequate pay raise to give to the PEIA.

The state Democrats are fraudulently posturing as champions of the teachers and public education. The Democrats are backing the governor's 5 percent proposal and the proposal for a bogus task force, which will include Lee, Campbell and White, that would look into possible revenue increases some time in the future.

The AFT-WV has removed the graphic from its Facebook page that said, "A freeze is not a fix!" criticizing Justice's proposal for a one-year freeze in PEIA changes, which would be followed by sharp increase, in some cases nearly a doubling of out-of-pocket costs for public employees. Once the governor announced the task force, the unions dropped the strikers' main demand to fully fund the PEIA.

At the Capitol Monday, as the *Charleston Gazette-*

*Mail* noted, union leaders were pushing the slogan "Pass that bill or we'll walk out" to back the Democrats' proposals. Instead, protesting educators changed the slogan, "Hey, hey, whaddy say, fund PEIA!"

The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are the political front men for the giant coal, natural gas, chemical and pharmaceutical corporations that dominate the state. The Democrats have controlled the governor's mansion for 32 of the last 40 years and have handed these corporations huge tax cuts with no intention of infringing on their profits.

During an 11-day strike in 1990, West Virginia teachers defied injunctions and the intransigence of Democratic Governor Gaston Caperton and a Democratic-controlled state legislature. The unions ended the strike on the basis of bogus promises to appoint commissions and task forces to find solutions to the underfunded healthcare program. In the three decades since, matters have only gotten worse.

"The union leaders thought they put a lid of this strike," a teacher from Boone County, an impoverished mining region, told the WSWS. "Last night the union 'leaders' were talking to us like fifth grade kids. They said we were dividing people by not listening to them and ending the strike. We said, 'No, the people are united down here. It's you, up on the stage, that we're divided with.'

"If you're out on the picket line you see all the support we're getting. We've put out our own flyers appealing to parents and students. Why should we accept a 5 percent raise and not secure long-term funding for the insurance of all state workers?"

"This problem has got to be solved for the long term or we are going to be sold out. There is a lot of money being made in natural gas. The tax cuts Trump just gave the corporations is what is been going on in West Virginia for years. The whole world is watching us to see what we do."



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