

“A lot of people are calling for all the workers to go out on strike”

State workers, auto workers, teachers throughout the world back West Virginia strike

Our reporters
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The strike by more than 30,000 West Virginia teachers and public school employees completed its first week on Friday. What began as a two-day walkout has been extended indefinitely after teachers rejected an agreement forged behind closed doors by the teachers unions and West Virginia Governor Jim Justice on Tuesday.

Striking teachers have won enormous support from the working class and youth. On Friday, students organized a mass demonstration at the capitol in Charleston. There are growing calls for an expanded struggle to connect the defense of the rights of teachers in West Virginia to the struggles of all workers in the state, the country and internationally.

The WSWS spoke Friday to autoworkers, teachers and other sections of the working class about the significance of developments in West Virginia.

A young state worker in West Virginia said, “All the state workers should back the teachers, and many of them do. A lot of people are now calling for all the workers to go out on strike. We just heard today that the Senate tabled the wage proposal, which just shows that if the teachers had not made their own independent initiative, they would have gone back with nothing.”

He continued, “It’s so important that the teachers decided to organize themselves independently of the union,” referring to the fact that the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) sought to shut down the strike based on empty promises from the governor, which the teachers rejected. “I agree with you about the union,” he said, noting the call by the WSWS for the formation of rank-and-file committees.

“I was never political,” the worker added. “But this now affects me and I’m learning something new every day. State workers have organized their own Facebook page, and the overwhelming sentiment is support for the teachers and we all should be going out.”

Other state workers in West Virginia reported that they had received emails from the government warning them that they could be fired if they walked out in support of the teachers.

A former auto worker who worked for 20 years at Ford

Michigan Assembly worker told the WSWS, “I think the West Virginia teachers are brave. I say, ‘Stick to it. You have to fight. They won’t give it to you unless you stand up. Otherwise they will just keep taking.’”

US auto workers have had their own experience with the role of unions in shutting down opposition to attacks on their jobs and living standards. In 2015, auto workers at Fiat Chrysler voted against a United Auto Workers-backed contract. The UAW responded by organizing a campaign of intimidation and threats to force through the pro-company deals at the Big Three auto companies over mass opposition.

The UAW is currently embroiled in a massive corruption scandal involving revelations of direct payment from the auto companies to union executives involved in negotiating contracts.

“The unions are all about money,” the Ford worker said. “They are out to help the company, not the workers. We gave up lots of things at Ford and never got them back. Why should you pay to support something that is not going to work for you?”

Al, a veteran worker at the General Motors Delta Township plant outside Lansing, Michigan said, “I can definitely see a reason for the teachers to strike, with the rising cost of living and higher health care costs. I am pretty sure the upper levels of administration could not live off what the teachers are getting paid. They deserve it, and they should get back pay as well.

“While I was listening to CNN, I heard one teacher interviewed who said she had been working 16 years and made \$42,000 a year. They have tier-two workers at GM who make more than that. Plus, teachers have a lot to deal with. I totally understand their situation.

“If their union is trying to get them to go back to work for less than they deserve, it’s no different from what we faced in 2015 with the Chrysler deal. It shouldn’t be valid, it should be void.”

Asked about a general strike to support the teachers, Al said, “A general strike would be very beneficial. It would be a powerful show of unity. It is not just them, it is all of us. It would show the world that workers are tired of being pushed aside. If it happens here, it could become a movement for workers’ rights all over the world.”

A worker at the Fiat Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly Plant in

Detroit said, “I was reading about what some of the families face. It is ridiculous how much they have to pay for medical. They are taking major losses and they can’t afford any more losses.

“I say they should stick together and fight to get what they deserve. There is unity in numbers and we are all connected. Seeing everyone united will encourage other workers to stand up.”

She encouraged workers to resist the attempts of the teachers unions to end the strike. “The unions are not for the working class. They are corrupt, and they have a hand in with management.

“Seeing the teachers united and boldly taking a stand is a step in the right direction. To believe the Democrats are going to step in to help is like believing in a magic genie. They should keep doing what they are doing.

“The media is trying to keep this quiet because they are afraid of the uproar it would cause if the teachers win. They don’t want workers to see they can stand up against the unions and fight to get what they deserve.”

The West Virginia teachers strike has inspired workers engaged in struggles throughout the Appalachian region.

BarbiAnn Maynard, who has been involved in the efforts of workers in Martin County, Kentucky to secure access to clean drinking water, posted a statement on her Facebook page supporting the strike.

“Our government was founded on the principle of ‘a government of the people, for the people and by the people,’” she wrote. “Yet, the people are roaring, and our government is turning their backs on us.

“I want the teachers of WV to know that Martin County, Kentucky supports you. The entire eastern side of our county is only divided by the Tug River. You are our neighbors.

“I am a resident of Martin County, and our fight is for clean water. We are working with the residents of Flint, Michigan and what I have learned from this is that almost four years later, little has been done and not much has changed.

“We are all fighting the government which is not standing by its foundations. What they are actually doing is failing the people. Keep fighting!”

Workers throughout the world have used social media to spread information about the strike and express their support. Others have sent messages to the WSWs.

Brian, a retired elementary school teacher in Kitchner, Ontario, wrote: “I wholeheartedly support the West Virginia teachers and education employees in their struggle for large salary increases and affordable health care benefits.

“I know firsthand about the unwieldy report card process, the misdirection of time and resources to standardized testing, and the overwhelming pressure of trying to meet the needs of students integrated into the classroom without adequate help.

“In my former school board, teachers’ extended health care benefits face erosion, and salary increases do not match inflation. Public education is chronically underfunded while private school enrollment grows steadily.

“The education workers of West Virginia represent the interests of all working people across America and internationally, confronted with lack of jobs, deteriorating working conditions, underfunded health and education services, and attacks on the right

of collective bargaining.

“Teachers must take their struggle out of the hands of the unions. These pro-business organizations collaborate with the employer in the assault on working conditions.

“Educators face a unified opposition: the employer, the government, the media; and, most significantly, the banks and corporations. Against this enemy, teachers need to mobilize the support of workers from all sections of the workforce confronted by similar assaults on their own living conditions.”

Margo, a retired primary school teacher from Manchester, UK, wrote: “I would like to extend greetings and support to the striking teachers in West Virginia. By defying your trade union leaders, who have rushed to try and secure a sellout deal, you are showing the way forward for workers the world over.

“The unions in the UK always justify their isolation of disputes by citing the anti-union laws. I read that it is illegal for teachers to strike in your state—this has nevertheless not stopped you.

“As a primary school teacher of 24 years in the UK before I retired, my experience with the unions and governments matches yours. Our teaching unions rolled over while successive Labour and Conservative governments introduced the national curriculum (constantly revised), unnecessary planning, rigorous testing linked to performance pay and dreaded Ofsted inspections. All these are bad for mental health of both staff and pupils.

“Schools have been turned into a market, competing on the basis of test results. Everything that can be, is privatised. The arts, sport, the things that help children become healthy, happy and above all critical human beings is subordinated to fulfilling insane and arbitrary targets.

“The unions isolated and betrayed our pensions dispute. Not satisfied with the betrayals that saw our pensions eroded in 2011, the powers that be are proposing to further erode pensions and expand privatisation, taking on the university and college lecturers first.

“Over 40,000 lecturers are taking strike action, while the unions are desperately seeking to do a deal with management.

“We cannot allow the unions to divide, isolate and betray the lecturers strike, or your battle, which must be broadened out to include all sections of the working class. We are all in the same boat, young and old alike. Let’s fight for a future for all our young people, by linking strikes with a political struggle against capitalism and for world socialism.”

“In a day of compromise, surrender and disgrace, you are an inspiration,” wrote John, from Redondo Beach, California. “I’m a retired teacher, Korea vet, and great-great grandfather, and I admire y’all and what you are doing. Thank you. I have great respect for you and your sacrifices.”

Louise, a teacher in British Columbia, Canada, wrote: “West Virginia Teachers Stand by your principles! Workers are behind you. Your actions are contagious!”



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