

Support grows for West Virginia teachers as unions, Democrats scramble to end strike

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The powerful strike of more than 30,000 West Virginia teachers and other school employees completed its first week on Friday. The teachers unions and state Democrats are scrambling to try to shut the walkout down and send teachers back to work Monday morning based on an agreement that rank-and-file educators have already rejected.

On Tuesday night, the leaders of the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) and the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association (WVSSPA) announced a deal with the state's billionaire governor, Jim Justice, and instructed strikers to return to work Thursday morning.

However, educators rejected the one-time five percent raise, which was not guaranteed, and the governor's promise to set up yet another task force to address the long-term underfunding of the state's Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA), which has resulted in impossibly high out-of-pocket medical expenses for teachers, school service personnel and other public employees.

On Friday, thousands of high school and other students converged on the state capitol for a demonstration to support their teachers. The rally was organized on social media independently of the unions and state Democrats. The call by a speaker from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) for the mobilization of the entire working class behind the teachers, including preparations for a general strike in event of a strikebreaking injunction, was enthusiastically supported by the crowd.

Students joined an estimated 1,000 teachers and other school employees who continued their protests inside the state capitol. While the Republican-controlled House of Delegates approved the five percent raise by

98–1 on Wednesday, in the hopes that it would end the strike, Senate President Mitch Carmichael has not allowed the proposal to come to a vote in the Senate, saying he was not going to be “boxed in a corner” by “protesters.”

The student protest took place as sentiment to join the teachers' strike grew among non-educational state employees—who will get an even more insulting three percent raise under the proposal accepted by the unions. One state worker told the WSWS that “the overwhelming sentiment [among state workers] is support for the teachers, and we all should be going out.”

On Friday evening, the unions, working with state Democrats, sought to deescalate the situation, countering calls for an occupation of the Capitol by proposing instead a rally today, when the Senate is scheduled to reconvene.

Having already taken the measure of the unions, Carmichael may well want to provoke a confrontation with teachers and school employees and use court injunctions and possible mass firings, fines and even arrests. The aim would be to cow strikers and make an example of them, as Reagan did by firing 13,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981.

The governor, state Democrats and unions fear that such a confrontation could provoke a social explosion, and that any effort to break the strike could result in mass defiance and solidarity actions to defend the embattled teachers.

In comments cited by the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, Governor Justice said, “If they don't do it tomorrow [Saturday], we spiral off into no man's land. In all honesty it has to happen tomorrow.” This followed his comments last week, when he said, “I really don't want to go to DEFCON 15,” referring to military

preparedness for all-out war.

Late Friday night, the WVEA issued a statement complaining that Carmichael had “inflamed” educators, parents and other citizens and created “anger, distrust.” This, the union said, had “escalated an already volatile situation.” The union ended the statement with a pathetic appeal for the senator to “step up and be a leader.”

The union officials, state Democrats and a significant section of the state Republicans hope that a five percent raise and empty promises of some future fix for the PEIA will be enough to get teachers and school employees to end their fight.

The local and national news media are seeking to reassert the authority of the WVEA and AFT-WV over the rebellious educators. An editorial in the Republican-leaning newspaper *Charleston Daily Mail* Thursday began: “Here are some words for striking school teachers and service personnel that you won’t see in the Daily Mail Opinion page very often: listen to your union leaders and return to work.”

The editorial praised union leaders for knowing “that a ‘permanent fix’ to the complex issue that is PEIA cannot be done in a day,” and understanding “what the psychology of the striking crowd does not: that a lingering wildcat strike could do long-term, currently unforeseen damage to teachers, students and public education in West Virginia.”

The *New York Times*, which studiously ignored the strike for days until declaring it dead when union officials signed the sellout deal with the governor, also chimed in with praise for the WVEA and AFT-WV officials. In an editorial, “West Virginia Teachers Give a Lesson in Union Power,” the *Times* ignored the strikebreaking role of the unions and tried to portray the strike, which has erupted against the unions, as a battle led by them.

The *Times* cited the Supreme Court case of *Janus vs. AFSCME*, concerning laws in some states that require public sector workers who do not belong to unions to pay the equivalent of dues. The West Virginia strike, it claimed, showed that “public-sector unions have been the last bastion of worker strength.”

The *Times* did not mention the statement by AFSCME lawyer David Frederick before the court, that “union security is the tradeoff for no strikes.” The actual role of the unions—in West Virginia and

throughout the country—is not to lead struggles of workers, but to suppress them.

The West Virginia strike is at a crossroads. Whatever emerges out of the debate among Democrats, Republicans and union officials in West Virginia, it will not meet any of the demands of teachers. The political representatives of the ruling class are giving teachers a “choice”: either accept the agreement you have already rejected or face injunctions, fines and possible imprisonment.

The actions of rank-and-file teachers and other school employees have already pointed to an entirely different course. By rejecting the union-backed agreement with Justice and continuing their strike, they have taken a courageous stand in defense of the interests of the entire working class.

To defeat the conspiracies of the big business politicians, the struggle of teachers and school employees must be extended. This requires the formation of rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the unions, to appeal to every section of the working class—miners, public employees, energy workers, hospital workers, factory workers, young people and others—to mobilize the full strength of the working class to back the striking school employees.

Mass meetings and demonstrations should be called and discussions held on preparing a general strike to defend teachers against injunctions and threats of firings, fines and jail time. Appeals must be made to teachers in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states fighting to defend the right quality public education. This struggle must lay the basis for an industrial and political counter-offensive against austerity and social inequality.



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