

Support grows for striking West Virginia teachers as decisive week starts

Jerry White
5 March 2018

Thousands of striking West Virginia teachers and school employees are gathering at the state capitol in Charleston today to press their demands for livable wages and the right to high-quality health care. The strike by more than 33,000 teachers and support staff has entered its eighth day and a new and decisive stage.

The mass protests today take place as 1,400 Frontier Communications workers have gone on strike across West Virginia and in parts of Virginia. The workers, who are members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), have been working without a contract since August 5 of last year, and are fighting job cuts and efforts to destroy their health care coverage.

On Saturday night, the Republican-controlled state Senate carried out a calculated provocation against the striking teachers, voting to reduce the pay offer to teachers and school employees from five percent to four percent. Senate President Mitch Carmichael and the powerful energy, chemical and other corporate interests that stand behind him have thrown down the gauntlet to teachers and public employees.

The actions of Carmichael have exposed the bankruptcy of the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) and the West Virginia School Service and Personnel Association (WVSSPA), which have told strikers to put their faith in backroom deals between the unions and state Democrats and Republicans.

From the beginning, the WVEA, AFT-WV and the WVSSPA were opposed to any strike. They were forced by rank-and-file educators to call limited statewide strikes and then extend them. Then the unions sought to shut down the strike last week based on a worthless promise from Jim Justice, the state's billionaire governor, for a five percent raise and the

convening of yet another task force to address the chronic underfunding of the state-run Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA).

Teachers met across the state and decided to reject the unions' deal and defy their instructions to return to work on Thursday. Since then, as teachers, students and other workers continued to rally at the state Capitol, the union leaders and state Democratic politicians have been plotting to end the strike on the basis of a rotten "compromise" that does nothing to address rising health costs and near-poverty wages for educators, school employees and other state workers.

In the days following the teachers' rebellion, the unions, with the backing of local and national media, have sought to reestablish their control of the strike and direct it behind the Democratic Party. They are bringing forward figures such as state Senator Richard Ojeda, a right-wing Democrat and supporter of Trump in the last election, to lower expectations and convince teachers that their whole battle has been fought for one more percentage point. At the same time, fixing the PEIA has been dropped by the unions and the state legislature.

In response to Saturday's events, WVEA President Dale Lee announced that the strike would continue "indefinitely" until the bill "passes at 5 percent."

While declaring the strike "illegal," Governor Justice has thus far refrained from seeking an injunction and has relied on the unions to break the strike. He warned that failure to reach a deal on Saturday, however, would throw the government into "no man's land." This followed comments to the Charleston Gazette Mail February 23 when he said, "I really don't want to go to DEFCON 15," referring to military preparedness for all-out war.

Signaling the contempt of the Democrats for the

teachers' strike, US Senator and former West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin said nothing about this critical battle during interviews on nationally televised Sunday morning news talk shows. At the same time, he defended his pro-corporate tax cuts that have starved the PEIA of funds.

With the teachers facing threats of injunctions, fines and possible arrests, and resistance spreading to other sections of the working class, including the Frontier telecom workers, the conditions are growing for a broader struggle, including a general strike, to defeat any attempt to break the teachers' strike.

There is enormous support for the striking teachers. On Friday, thousands of high school and other students participated in a demonstration to support their teachers, and there are growing calls among state workers for united action. Teachers and public-school workers in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Arizona, California and other states are pressing for strike action.

In Madison, Boone County, a state worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I grew up the son and grandson of coal miners, and West Virginians are used to fighting for rights, wages and benefits. I don't think the teachers will settle, or should settle, for anything less than they deserve. The coal miners, the teachers, the working class, we are the one that make them rich, and it's ridiculous that money is controlling our education system."

Pointing to the statements of support from teachers in Africa, Europe and other continents, the worker *said*, "It's amazing that this little state of West Virginia, that people across the world are getting behind them. People in every country understand that if you work you should have a decent wage and health care. It doesn't matter what country you're from."

In Logan County, a young mother and the wife of a surface miner said, "Everyone should be striking, not just the teachers, everybody is in struggle. My husband worked as a postal worker, and now he's on a surface mine, making \$14 an hour. And then you have the ones who are rich, and they don't have to worry about stuff, about taking their son to special needs doctor or to therapy. They don't care about that as long as they are getting paid."

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are urging educators to form rank-and-

file strike committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the union officials and expand the movement throughout the region and nationally.

These committees should issue appeals to other state workers, educators, health care workers, miners, chemical workers, unemployed workers and youth to join the struggle and fight for the right of all workers for secure and good paying jobs, quality health care and other social rights.

The workers of West Virginia, the United States and the entire world are the real allies of the teachers and telecom workers—not union bureaucrats and bribed political representatives of the corporations and banks! 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. This will lay the basis for an industrial and political counteroffensive nationally against austerity and social inequality.

The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party will do everything in our power to assist teachers and other workers in carrying out this strategy.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact