

“Teachers from Oklahoma stand with West Virginia”

Oklahoma teachers demand strike action, funding for education

Todd Thompson
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Teachers in Oklahoma are angry. They are threatening to follow West Virginia educators in statewide strike action against an intransigent legislature entirely beholden to the energy industries and big businesses.

“Teachers from Oklahoma stand with West Virginia,” an Oklahoma teacher and supporter of the Facebook group Oklahoma Teachers United (OTU) told the WSWS. “On Friday of next week [March 9] Oklahoma teachers will go to the national media and announce a strike date. Hang strong West Virginia! We need your courage as we approach the microphone.”

Oklahoma teachers have been paid on the same salary scale for the last 10 years. Like West Virginia, their last statewide strike was in 1990. The Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) union has steadfastly opposed strike action, citing its illegality. In response to the years of both legislative and union indifference, teachers have now organized independently through social media to demand action.

Another Facebook group, “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout – The Time is Now!” has ballooned to more than 40,000 members within a week. A meeting of several dozen teachers from seven districts around the state was held Friday in Oklahoma City. The groups have discussed a possible walkout April 2, during the period of standardized testing, or “not returning” after spring break. They have publicized a list of 30 school districts in which the state superintendents have agreed to “suspend school to support teachers.” Other educators have made their views known, with one posting, “It needs to be more than just a one-day deal.”

Students have continued to show their support for teachers. Bartlesville High School students walked out Friday, February 23 carrying signs “We Love Our Teachers” to protest the education funding cuts. Students

at Oneta Ridge Middle School walked out last Wednesday to support educators.

While passing huge tax cuts to large energy companies and to the top individual income-earners, the Oklahoma legislature has enacted budget cuts making its educators’ salaries 50th out of 50 states. The recently-released ranking from the Bureau of Labor Statistics report of 2016 has only added fuel to the fire among teachers.

“Ten years is long enough,” one educator told the WSWS. “Nothing has happened except the oil and gas companies are getting richer while we’re getting poorer. We can’t even afford to go to the doctor when we’re sick. The union should have been out front in this, and they’ve accomplished nothing.”

According to a January report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Oklahoma has cut per capita student funding by 28.2 percent over the last decade—the most drastic decline in the country. The defunding of public education in the state has also resulted in crippling teacher “churn.” Tulsa Public Schools lost 35 percent of its teachers within two years, according to the *Tulsa World*.

Over 100 school districts in the state have gone to a four-day class schedule to cut maintenance and transportation costs. Facing a dire teacher shortage, school districts are granting emergency credentials to willing adults and placing them in the classroom. There are currently 1,850 such people teaching school in the state. “This year, I emergency-certified my secretary,” Penny Risley, the principal of an elementary school in Wagoner, told *The Economist*.

Molly Jaynes told local media KTUL, “Frustration levels are high, so a strike is not a touchy word anymore. I think we have surpassed the point of conversations, and I don’t think that there’s anything the legislators have provided us recently to give us any sort of hope that

they're going to take actual actions this time.”

An “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout?” petition has garnered almost 20,000 signatures of teachers and others calling for a raise of \$10,000 per year. The comments from the signees tell the story of pent-up anger and resentment. Gay La Carmichael wrote, “I’m tired of being told ‘all the good teachers are leaving.’ I’m tired of being told I knew what I was getting into when I chose to become a teacher. I’m tired of scraping by to pay my bills. I’m tired of hot gluing and taping my textbooks together. My students deserve better. I deserve better.”

When asked about the reaction of the Oklahoma Education Association, the OTU supporter told the WSWS, “We went to the union a year ago and told them about our strategic plan, and we asked for their support. We were told in no uncertain terms, ‘You will get none!’”

The OEA announced in February its support for a bill calling for a regressive tax on fuel and cigarettes that would supposedly fund a \$5,000 pay increase for teachers. This grossly inadequate increase, even endorsed by Governor Mary Fallin, was spurned by educators who said that a \$10,000 a year increase is the minimum. The paltry measure was defeated in any event.

An elementary school teacher told the WSWS that several of the teachers in her school were increasingly dissatisfied with the union. One teacher recently told her, “I’m seriously thinking about quitting the union because they haven’t accomplished anything.”

For their part, Democrats have shed crocodile tears for the teachers, blaming the Republicans for the tax cuts awarded to the state’s largest industries, oil and gas. However, Democrats dominated the state for nearly 100 years after it joined the Union in 1907, during which time adequate education funding was never attained.

Under Democratic Governor Brad Henry, bipartisan agreements resulted in deep tax cuts for the state’s wealthy between 2004 and 2007, laying the basis for catastrophic cuts to schools. The slashing of income taxes has continued apace under Republican Governor Mary Fallin, with annual savings since 2005 to top earners estimated at \$1.022 billion according to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy.

Meanwhile the energy industry has not only netted billions in profits, but the legislature has also handed the oil-and-gas industry \$300 million to \$500 million yearly in direct tax breaks. Among the most profitable corporations reaping tax rewards in the state are Exxon Mobil, Halliburton, Valero Energy, Phillips 66, Chevron,

Patterson-UTI Drilling and military contractors Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Northrup Grumman.

All of these measures have exacerbated the social crisis in the state. Oklahoma is one of the hungriest states in the nation, with one in four children experiencing hunger every day. State support for higher education has been cut by \$76 million since 2009. The dire budget cuts to education have had huge implications for educators and their families, driving up class sizes and eliminating programs.

Many teachers are working two jobs to make ends meet, a special education teacher told the WSWS. Another said, “I am driving a 15-year-old car with 200,000 miles on it. I have two daughters in college, using student loans they will have to pay back for the rest of their lives. Our insurance has shot up so high that we have only a few hundred dollars a month to buy food and incidentals after we pay our mortgage. I am hoping a pay increase will come before my car dies completely.

“The unions have done nothing but to impede progress we might have made without them. And, we can’t wait any longer on them.”

The author recommends:

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