

“If you have one bad illness and go to the hospital, that wipes your income out”

## West Virginia teachers demand the right to affordable healthcare

A WSWS reporting team  
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with many of the thousands of striking teachers, school bus drivers, custodians, aides and other school employees who rallied at the West Virginia state capital on Monday as part of their continuing strike, which has closed schools across the state since February 22.

Throughout the rally, the unions continued their efforts to bury the question of affordable healthcare. But for teachers, this is the most urgent and pressing issue.

In virtually every case, workers described the same basic situation. The insultingly low offer of a five percent wage increase, which the unions assert would constitute a major victory, would be eaten up by annual increases in their healthcare insurance premiums, deductibles and co-pays for doctors' visits.

Gwyn, a teacher with 25 years from Cabell County, carried a sign bearing the slogan, “Will work for healthcare.” “Maybe it’s not popular now,” she joked, a reference to the fact that any mention of the Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA) has been dropped from the union’s public statements. Last week, the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) updated its Facebook profile picture to remove any reference to “fixing” the PEIA.

“They’re going to hike PEIA,” Gwyn said. “I’ve seen it go up steadily over 25 years. So, a five percent raise isn’t a raise at all. I had to drop my husband from my health coverage because it was so expensive. Now he is getting ready to retire so I’m going to have to pick him back up. I was paying over \$200 per month.”

Like many other workers, Gwyn spoke with distrust

of the latest union-government “task force” announced by the union and billionaire governor Jim Justice to supposedly discuss funding proposals for PEIA. Workers organized to continue their strike against the order by the union to shut down the strike on February 27. “When they proposed the task force, and the union said to go back to work, I didn’t trust it. I really think we need to fight until we get what we deserve,” she said.

Gwyn rejected the claim by both Democrats and Republicans that there is “no money” to fund healthcare for the working class. “Where is the money?” she asked. “I’m thinking tax some of these coal companies would be a start.”

Gwyn’s grandfather was a coal miner and her father worked for coal companies in West Virginia. There was “absolutely” a mood among coal miners, she said, for a united fight with teachers. “They know what it’s like,” she said. “The coal companies come in, rape our land, break our roads, poison our water, and then take off. People were in their 40s and were left to start over again. And many of them didn’t.

“There are a lot of health problems,” she added. “My dad got black lung. They’re denying people affordable healthcare in a state riddled with pollution, poor drinking water and a poor quality of life. On top of that you don’t have insurance, or you have insurance you can’t afford, that’s not right.”

Katie, a school bus driver, spoke about the union’s effort to shut down the strike. “The ‘cooling off’ day on Wednesday they announced just made everybody hotter,” she said. “It gave us time to think and say,

‘Hey, we’re getting screwed. Now man up!’ When the union said to go back I thought, ‘We’re going to stay on strike and be here.’”

Katie explained the main issues in the strike. “We need to improve the whole situation, PEIA and wages. I went to the doctor because I injured my leg and they wanted me to pay \$340 upfront or they wouldn’t see me. I just don’t go.

Her colleague Linda, a teacher, added, “You don’t go to the doctor unless you really have to because you have to pay \$40 a visit.”

Katie replied, “If you have one bad illness and have to go to hospital that wipes your income out. So, we’re in this fight for the long haul, whatever it takes.” As far as wages, she said the raise “ought to be a \$10,000. There’s money for it, but it’s in their [the companies’] pockets. Look at their houses and look at what I live in.

“What if we shut down for a week across the whole country? It would be great. Shut it down and let them see where their money comes from. We give it to them.

“When you retire, you haven’t got anything left to turn back on,” Katie said. “You just retire and hope you can make it. They’re getting rich off the American workers. That’s where they get their money—what they don’t steal from other countries.” When asked what she thought about uniting with workers internationally in a common struggle, Katie responded, “It should be like that. Everybody is starving everywhere.”

Shauna has been teaching since 1990, and currently works as a part-time teacher. “My health insurance started at \$103 eight years ago and it’s up to \$180 per month now. But I get half the pay of a regular teacher even though I’m in a classroom every day and do two teaching blocks. That’s two thirds of a regular teacher. So, when there is talk about raising the premium, that will swallow a whole paycheck of mine.”

Shauna said she believed the proposal for a 16-month freeze of PEIA and a taskforce was being used to get workers back to work and what would follow would be another insurance price hike. “They froze the PEIA for 16 months, so it will hit us in the summer when we’re off of school and we can’t organize like we are doing now,” she said. “They’re going to throw that one on us and raise our premiums or cancel our insurance altogether.”

A WSWS reporter noted that the government’s slogan concerning the task force was to “trust us.” She

responded, “Since 1990 we’ve been trusting them! We were promised better benefits instead of a raise. So, we’ve been working at low wages, but we had good benefits and we included that in our salary. It’s been changing over the last eight years. Our co-pays are going up and our premiums are going up. So enough is enough.”

Shauna commented on the so-called “debate” between Democrats and Republicans about a proposed four or five percent wage raise for teachers. “The more you sit in on these meetings, the more frustrated you get at what’s going on in this building. The more you realize it is a game. Even this delay is a game. They say there’s no money but they’re really good at finding tax cuts for big business.”



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