

Thousands converge on state capitol to show support for West Virginia teachers strike

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Striking West Virginia teachers, school bus drivers, custodians and other public-school employees from across the state, along with workers and young people supporting their struggle, converged on the state capitol in Charleston Monday, on the eighth day of the continuing statewide strike by 33,000 school employees.

The mobilization came after the Republican-controlled state Senate on Saturday night reduced to four percent the meager offer of a five percent raise backed by the governor and lower House of Delegates. If the two bodies do not agree on a bill by Tuesday—although the deadline could be extended—an earlier law specifying a 2 percent raise in July, and then 1 percent over the next two years, would be imposed.

Striking workers and their supporters filled the capitol building to capacity, with more than 7,000 protesting inside and hundreds, if not thousands, more outside. The mood was exhilarant. Strikers carried homemade signs with their demands for decent wages and affordable health care, and there was a palpable sense that this struggle was historic and was sparking a far broader movement of working-class opposition.

Commenting on the recently started strike of 1,400 Frontier Communications workers in West Virginia, and the calls for a walkout by Oklahoma teachers to demand a \$10,000 raise, Lorene, a school bus driver from Wayne County, in the southwest corner of the state, said, “It’s time for people to take a stand for what’s right. These days of the rich living high on the hog are over. We’ve opened the door, and I hope it turns into a humongous gate.”

While strikers are demanding a significant improvement in wages—West Virginia teachers are among the lowest paid in the nation—their chief demand is for the state government to fully fund the Public

Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA), which provides medical coverage to teachers and other public employees and their families.

By deliberately underfunding the PEIA, successive Democratic and Republican administrations have shifted the cost of health care from the state government to the backs of teachers and other public employees, forcing them to pay impossibly high out-of-pocket costs, which has resulted in a de facto pay cut for years.

The determination of teachers and school workers contrasted sharply with the efforts of the teacher and service personnel unions, which have entirely dropped the demand to “fix the PEIA.” At a quickly assembled rally on the capitol steps Monday afternoon, none of the leaders from 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) even mentioned the main demand of the strikers.

Instead, WVEA President Dale Lee praised the Democrats in the state Senate, along with some Republicans who voted for the five percent pay raise. He absurdly sought to define the historic battle by teachers as one of convincing recalcitrant Republicans to agree to one more percent. If Senate leader Mitch Carmichael and other Republicans continued to resist, Lee blustered, “We’ll be back tomorrow, and the next day.”

A week ago, Lee, AFT-WV President Christine Campbell and WVSSPA President Joe White cut a backroom deal with the state’s billionaire governor Jim Justice for a five percent raise and to recruit the union officials onto yet another task force on the PEIA. When they tried to order teachers back to work based on this

sellout, it provoked a firestorm of opposition, with rank-and-file teachers and school employees organizing votes on picket lines, in local communities and online to defy the unions and continue the strike.

Since then, the unions, with the aid of the local and national news media, have attempted to reassert their control over the struggle, based on the bogus claim that union leaders have now learned their lessons and will follow the lead of their members. But the reality is that the unions did everything to prevent this strike and they are determined to smother it now.

The struggle began after teachers in the coal counties of Wyoming, Mingo and Logan launched strikes and came up to Charleston for the first time on February 2. It was only after a series of further one-day strikes that the unions were forced to call a limited statewide walkout and then extend it.

“It started in the three southern counties on their own,” a veteran teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “This all began in the meeting rooms and the cafeterias of the schools in those counties, not in the offices of the WVEA or AFT. No one told us to come out. It was simply that the people had gotten together and said, ‘We’re coming out.’ We all began with the same thing we are demanding now: decent insurance and relatively competitive wages with other states.

“I have concerns now that we have drifted far away from our original demands, and the leaders did not keep up with that. The overall feeling of the teachers is that we want PEIA fixed, good wages, and we believe all public employees should be included. The state legislators and the union are not talking about that. All the talk about 4 or 5 percent is just bait. We did not come out to strike for that and I hope we won’t go for it.

“The idea that we’ll take this now and if they don’t do what we want with the PEIA we’ll come back out is wrong. I know it takes a lot to get a movement like this going. We are mobilized now, and we have the ultimate leverage now. I believe the workers in Oklahoma; teachers have been inspired by this and it helped them do the right thing. That is another good thing about this movement, we’ve given people ideas to fight.”

The rebellion in West Virginia has sent a shock wave into the Washington, DC offices of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. Both unions have dispatched a small army

of functionaries to the state to try to prevent the courageous stand of West Virginia educators from sparking a movement the unions cannot control.

Addressing the rally, Lee noted that there were more NEA and AFT officials in the state than “you could shake a stick at” and claimed that the strikers and union leaders were all in the same struggle. He then introduced NEA President Lily Garcia, whose \$348,732 salary in 2016 was 7.6 times higher than the average pay of a West Virginia teacher, although not quite competitive with AFT President’s Randi Weingarten’s \$492,563 salary.

After saying how much the striking teachers were inspiring her, Garcia made it clear that the last thing she wanted was to see an escalating level of struggle by teachers across the country, against the conditions that the unions and their Democratic Party allies have imposed on teachers.

“I don’t know if you know what kind of inspiration you’ve been to 49 other states and millions of educators across this country,” she said. “I had a reporter in there saying, ‘Do you expect to see this in 49 other states, are you hoping that this is going to happen in 49 other states, and I said ‘Oh, No.’ This is not fun.”

But such a mobilization is exactly what is required. As the powerful movement of West Virginia teachers has demonstrated, everything depends on the independent initiative of rank-and-file workers.

This means electing rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, in every school and community, and fighting for the broadest mobilization of every section of the working class—all public employees, coal miners and other energy workers, Frontier telecom workers, workers in the chemical plants, factories, hospitals, along with working class youth and the unemployed.

Mass meetings and demonstrations should be called and discussions held on preparing a general strike to oppose any effort to use injunctions to break the strike.



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