

“West Virginia teachers have shown us team effort and organization”

Oklahoma teachers to discuss strike strategy

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Oklahoma teachers are demanding statewide strike action to reverse years of declining living standards, increasing class sizes and budget cuts to K-12 education. Two Facebook groups, Oklahoma Teachers United (OTU) and Oklahoma Teacher Walkout-The Time is Now, have called meetings today asking for representatives from every school to consider the timing of strikes and protests by educators.

The developments in Oklahoma underscore the fact that an insurgency of teachers and other workers is growing well beyond West Virginia. The courage of West Virginia educators—defying their own unions, the state’s anti-strike law and the bought-and-paid-for politicians—has inspired workers both nationally and internationally.

“Yes, there should be a strike here,” Denise, an Oklahoma special education teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. Like West Virginia, Oklahoma has not seen a teacher strike since 1990 and is a right-to-work state in which strikes by teachers are illegal.

“Oklahoma teachers are angry,” Denise said. “From my personal standpoint, I don’t make enough money. I am building the future for tomorrow, and I’ll probably be paying for my education for the rest of life. I’ve been teaching about 14 years, and I have about \$20,000 in student loans left to go. What I paid for a graduate degree isn’t being paid off by my salary bump.

“West Virginia teachers have shown us team effort and organization. It’s great to see someone else do this.”

However, referring the deal agreed by the unions with West Virginia Governor Jim Justice, to finance salary increases through cuts to social programs, Denise strongly objected: “Taking Medicaid from kids is wrong.”

The Oklahoma Facebook groups pushing for statewide walkouts are holding two conferences tomorrow, in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, to consider the date for a strike. “We will not be asking if teachers want to walkout.

This has already been stated loud and clear.” They cite a survey conducted by the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA), which reported that 85 percent of teachers want to strike, and 75 percent of parents would support it.

While stating that “neither OEA, nor the superintendents, have been able to unite the state,” OTU stated that they have spoken with the OEA and confirmed that they would “encourage” the plan promoted by Tulsa Public Schools for a three-step protest. That proposal consists of a “work-to-rule” (no working early or late), a walkout in groups of 10 who would protest at the Capitol and then return to work, and a full-strike in May if there is no acceptable resolution to their demands.

This timid course of action has been met with skepticism among Oklahoma teachers. “I am not a fan of this plan of ‘escalating actions,’” writes Lori Mallory Wilkinson. “A full walkout is the only way to get our point across. OEA should listen to its members... May is too late!” Daniel V. Payne agreed with this sentiment: “The politicians, elected and appointed officials, and superintendents have all had more than enough time... No escalated action, no expecting teachers to drive all the way to OKC just to protest. Shut down every school.”

“I am sorry to say this, but what a total waste of time; our ‘illustrious legislators’ would just lock their doors, pull the shades, hang out the closed sign if 10 people showed up at the capitol,” said a post by Nancy. “News media would not cover it. BUT 10 oil and gas lobbyists would be ushered into their offices. Also, I think the districts will lose a lot of support if the plan is rolled back to May.”

OEA President Alicia Priest responded to the growing demand for action by explicitly stating, “The goal is not a walkout... The goal is for us to have funding for public education to best meet the needs of our students.” She has

previously used the pretext of illegality to rule out strike activity.

Oklahoma teachers should pay careful attention to the role of the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers in West Virginia, which have worked to shut down the powerful strike precisely as it has gained national and international support. The unions did everything they could to prevent a broader mobilization of the working class behind educators.

The deal reached between the unions and Democratic and Republican politicians completely abandons the struggle to fully fund public sector workers' healthcare—the teachers' number one demand—because they have no intention of challenging the energy and big business interests and politicians who represent them.

It is no different in Oklahoma or anywhere else. For decades, the OEA has failed to lift a finger under conditions of the wholesale dismantling of public education in the state. Oklahoma educators, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, are presently paid 50th out of 50 states. The state has cut spending on K-12 education by \$1,058 per pupil over the last 10 years, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. A widespread teacher shortage, as a result of poverty salaries, has resulted in the extensive use of emergency credentials, placing non-certified adults in charge of classrooms.

Mid-year cuts to education in the state, which Governor Mary Fallin has said she would sign, would cut an additional \$16.2 million from the State Department of Education. The larger the district, the more drastic the funding reduction. Tulsa Public School faces the loss of another \$1 million.

At the same time, state lawmakers have slashed taxes for big businesses and the wealthy, cutting the top income tax rate from 6.65 percent to 5.0 percent, costing the state over \$1 billion a year. Meanwhile, tax breaks for the oil and gas industry are totaling close to half a billion a year since the early 2000s. In 2017, the industry was handed \$450 million.

While the Democrats pose as opponents of budget cuts to education, bipartisan agreements between 2004 and 2007 under the Democratic administration of Governor Brad Henry laid the basis for the defunding of education in the state.

The real allies of Oklahoma teachers are those in West Virginia and workers around the world. In fact, the Oklahoma Teachers United page was flooded with comments like “Stay strong and united! WV supports you!!”; “Jackson County Supports You #55STRONG”;

and “Berkeley County WV ... Stand strong and united.”

Teachers from other states have been likewise galvanized. “You stand up for all of us! Solidarity from New Jersey!” said another post addressed to Oklahoma teachers. Another teacher added, “Come on teachers! This needs to be NATIONWIDE!!!”

“Teachers are looking for lower class sizes,” Denise told to the WSWs. “It’s not unusual to have over 30 in a class. I am not supposed to have more than 10 in a class at one time because it’s Special Ed. I have learning disabled, autism, behavior issues—all of it. I now have 17 kids on my roster. I don’t ever say ‘no’ to more kids because my room is the best place for them in the school. I try to get them not only their IEP [Individualized Education Program], but social skills to help them survive not only in school but for life. It is so much to ask.

“In my 14 years, this is the biggest change, the number of kids in classes. Third and fourth grades have 33 kids—that is not a quality education.

“Our school has been graded, I think, a D. They are grading us on the test scores, but we have poverty-level kids. We are just racing against the clock, trying to cram everything in for the tests. We have about 66 percent of our children Hispanic, and many don’t really speak English. We need smaller classes. Many of our parents can’t meet during the day, they can’t take off work or they’ll be fired. So we stay late and accommodate them. We do so much more than what they measure.

“As you may have seen, now we are going to ‘work the contract’. This makes you realize how much extra you do! I do all my IEP meetings either before or after school.

“The oil business is the financial elite here. They get tax incentives instead of using money to help teachers. Trickle-down theory doesn’t work. It rigged against the poor people and even those not necessarily poor.”

The author recommends:

Oklahoma teachers demand strike action, funding for education

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