West Virginia teachers unions ram through sell-out deal to end strike

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On Tuesday afternoon, billionaire West Virginia Governor Jim Justice signed into law a bipartisan agreement announced earlier in the day by legislators to end the nine-day strike by teachers and other public school employees across the state.

The agreement, which the unions endorsed and are claiming as a victory, is a betrayal of the courageous struggle by 33,000 school workers.

It does nothing to address workers' primary demand: guaranteed funding for the state-run Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA). Instead, it provides a temporary freeze on rising health-care costs and sets up yet another task force to address the chronic underfunding of the PEIA. The task force will resolve nothing, since both political parties are beholden to the powerful energy and corporate interests in the state and refuse to impose any significant tax on them to fund health care.

Justice and the state legislators have boasted that the five percent pay raise, which also covers all state workers, will not be financed through any increase in taxes. Instead, it will be funded through budget cuts, including to the health insurance program Medicaid, upon which many school employees, their students and thousands of workers depend.

School employees have waged their fight for the right to health care—not for it to be taken from the poor. Teachers, who are already the 48th lowest paid of all states in the country, have made clear that a five percent raise will be more than eaten up due to future health-care cost increases.

An article published yesterday in the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* reports that the raises will be funded by $82 million in cuts to the 2018-2019 state budget, including $23 million allocated to repairing dilapidated state buildings, $7 million assigned to provide tuition for students at state community and technical colleges, and millions from Medicaid. Senate Finance Chairman Craig Blair said the Republican-controlled Senate had only agreed to the pay rise in exchange for "very deep" cuts, adding: "There's going to be some pain."

Union officials, aware that there would be deep opposition from workers, rushed the deal through as quickly as possible to ensure teachers had no time to come together, discuss it and vote on it. Even before the two houses of the state legislature had approved the bill, Justice had tweeted that the deal was done, and the media declared the strike over. Before union officials and the governor could sign the agreement, a robocall had been sent out to workers instructing them to return to work.

Union officials drew conclusions from the previous Tuesday, when they ordered workers back to school after a "cooling off" day. This gave the workers time to organize and vote to continue the strike in defiance of the union leaders.

Governor Jim Justice signed the bill into law during a press conference that was a lovefest between the billionaire governor, state Democratic and Republican politicians and union officials. Christine Campbell of the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) and Dale Lee of the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), grovelingly thanked the coal magnate as he handed them personalized copies of the signed bill.

Justice, who could write a personal check to fund PEIA for more than 30 years, postured as a friend of school workers. He let slip his real attitude to this movement when he declared that teachers had done "things that maybe were not the right thing to be done," and "maybe you did that out of frustration," and that "the world was looking at us saying: well I don't know

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if I like West Virginia right now."

In fact, the powerful nine-day strike in West Virginia became a pole of attraction and inspiration to workers in the US and around the world.

A WSWS reporter asked Justice to comment on the fact that not only did the bill not provide health-care funding for teachers, it would be paid for through cuts to funding for poor children. Justice responded that there was "not a chance on the planet" that such cuts would take place, but in the next breath declared that it may be "prudent" to cut $10 million from the state Medicaid fund because it currently has a cash surplus.

When teachers first heard of the deal, it was met with skepticism and distrust. Lorene, a school cook for nearly two decades, told WSWS reporters outside the capitol building immediately after the deal was announced, "I do not think they [the unions and legislature] will fix PEIA … They lied before. They broke promises before. I do know this: if it's not fixed, we will be back in full force."

Melanie, who has taught for over a decade, commented inside the capitol building: "I don't feel good about this because this 'compromise' is setting us up to look like the bad guy, because if one penny is taken from Medicaid it looks like we're greedy and selfish and we don't care who it comes from. I care! If I had a say, I'd say no deal. It's not right."

With the end of the strike, it is critical that workers in West Virginia, the United States and internationally draw the political lessons from the events of the past two weeks.

The strike demonstrated that the growth of class conflict will bring workers into ever more direct conflict with the right-wing trade union apparatuses which function as an industrial police force for the governments and companies. It was the teachers' defiance of the unions' back-to-work order that galvanized the support of ever-broader sections of the working class and youth.

The unions, terrified by this development, responded by sending a small army of bureaucrats to the state capitol to maintain the control of the unions over the workers. A major factor in the unions' effort to shut down the strike was the beginning of the strike by Frontier telecommunications workers in West Virginia over the weekend, and the growing support for the strike from teachers in Oklahoma, Kentucky and other states.

National Education Association President Lily Eskelsen Garcia, with a salary of over $300,000, expressed the attitude of the unions when she emphatically declared that the unions did not want to see an expansion of the struggle to other states.

The objective striving of the workers to break free from the union apparatuses must be consciously organized in the form of new organs of struggle, rank-and-file committees elected by and from among the workers themselves.

The coming struggles must be grounded, above all, on a clear political perspective. The West Virginia teachers' struggle demonstrated that the defense of the social rights of the working class—to health care, education and decent jobs—centers on the question of which social class controls society's wealth and decides how it is allocated: the international working class, the overwhelming mass of society, or a tiny layer of corporate billionaires. The guaranteeing of such rights requires the fight to expropriate society's resources from the corporate elite and the socialist reorganization of economic life in the interests of the working class.

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