

Lessons of the West Virginia teachers strike

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The nine-day strike by more than 33,000 West Virginia teachers and other public school employees ended on Wednesday morning. Teachers returned to work in districts throughout the state, amidst growing anger over the terms of the union-backed agreement rushed through the state legislature and signed by Governor Jim Justice on Tuesday.

The determined struggle in West Virginia has captured the attention of workers throughout the United States and the world who supported and identified with the fight by teachers for decent wages and an end to soaring health care costs. The struggle was a powerful demonstration of the growing militancy of workers in the United States and internationally, which revealed that the basic division in society is not race or gender, but class.

Contrary to the proclamations of the unions, however, the deal reached to end the strike is not a victory for teachers. It does nothing to address teachers' central demand—an end to escalating health care costs through the Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA) that effectively wipe out any pay raises. Moreover, the one-time five percent raise for public workers will be funded by deep cuts to social programs.

The attitude of the giant corporations that control the state to the settlement of the strike was articulated by an editorial in the right-wing *Charleston Daily Mail*, which last week attacked teachers for refusing to follow the orders of the unions and return to work. “Three cheers for Republicans in the Senate of West Virginia,” the newspaper enthused, for not “caving to the demands of an unruly crowd by passing higher taxes.”

Instead of taxing the wealthy and the energy corporations that dominate the state and control both the Democrats and Republicans, any additional funding for meager pay increases will come from the cancelation of a free community college tuition program, a \$10 million reduction in the Medicaid

health care program for low-income residents, the elimination of new funding for free health care clinics, and other cuts.

The *Daily Mail* gleefully added that perhaps the “biggest opportunity for savings is the state and county education bureaucracy”—that is, the elimination of public employee jobs.

The framework of the agreement is a provocation. Teachers did not strike to see health care and essential services for other workers ripped away. They did not fight to have meager pay increases financed by the further impoverishment of their students.

The struggle in West Virginia is not over. The more teachers learn about the deal that was used to force them back to work, the angrier will be the response. Moreover, the strike heralds a growing resurgence of the class struggle throughout the United States and internationally.

This makes all the more necessary a conscious assimilation of the lessons of the West Virginia teachers strike.

The suppression of the strike is the result of the systematic, conscious and deliberate treachery of the trade unions—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and their state affiliates, along with the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the other AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions.

From the very beginning, the struggle demonstrated the chasm that separates the working class from the organizations calling themselves unions, which take workers' dues money and do the bidding of the corporations and the state. The strike was initiated by discussions in school cafeterias and meeting rooms, and on social media, by teachers in the southern coalfield counties, not in the offices of the WVEA and AFT-WV.

As sentiment for a struggle erupted throughout the

state, the unions called a limited two-day statewide strike in an effort to contain workers' militancy, followed by a two-day extension. Then, on February 27, the unions suddenly announced a deal with Governor Justice and ordered teachers back to work on March 1.

Teachers, however, rebelled. They organized meetings on the picket lines, in the capitol and online where they rejected arguments by union functionaries who tried to cow workers with threats that a continuing strike would alienate the parents and result in injunctions and punishing fines. In county after county, school workers voted to defy the strikebreaking orders by the WVEA, AFT-WV and the school service workers union, and continued their battle.

By revolting, the striking workers had, at least temporarily, broken through the straitjacket imposed by the unions, and this incipient working class movement became a powerful pole of attraction for workers and youth throughout the state, the country and the world.

The response of the unions was to redouble their efforts to shut down the strike at the very point it was gathering strength and inspiring other sections of the working class to take similar action. The walkout by 1,400 Frontier Communications workers in West Virginia and Virginia last weekend made the end of the strike, from the standpoint of the union executives, all the more necessary.

The last thing the unions wanted to see was an escalating working class movement, which would undermine everything they have done to suppress the class struggle since 1981, when the breaking of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike set in motion an unbroken string of betrayals. With the *Janus vs. AFSCME* case on the constitutionality of "agency fees" paid to public employee unions pending before the Supreme Court, the unions were eager to demonstrate their usefulness to the ruling elite, as expressed by a union lawyer in oral arguments last month: "Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes."

The new agreement on Tuesday—essentially a repackaging of the same deal that teachers had rejected—was rammed through without allowing teachers an opportunity to discuss it and vote on a return to work. All the auxiliary organizations of the Democratic Party—the Democratic Socialists of America, *Jacobin* Magazine, the International Socialist

Organization, and many others—were mobilized to declare the strike a victory.

The strike-breaking operation of the unions is bound up with their essential function. They are not working-class organizations, but agencies of the corporations and the state. The teachers unions are no different from the United Auto Workers, which was revealed to have taken direct bribes from the auto companies in exchange for pushing through pro-company agreements.

The West Virginia teachers strike indicates the trajectory of the developing movement. The resurgence of class struggle will bring workers into ever more direct and open conflict with the trade unions. Wherever a struggle begins, workers must be armed with an understanding of the role that the unions will play. They exist to defend capitalism and police the working class.

Throughout the strike, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party called on teachers to form independent rank-and-file committees, to unite teachers with the entire working class. In West Virginia, the formation of such committees is necessary to prepare for the next stage in the fight against the attack on wages and health care. The formation of factory and workplace committees throughout the country and internationally will provide the framework for unifying the struggles of the entire working class in a political movement against the state apparatus, the Democratic and Republican Parties, and the capitalist system.

The critical question, not only for teachers, but all sections of the working class, is the building of a socialist leadership, which will encourage the independent organization and initiative of the workers, raise their class consciousness, clarify the fundamental political issues posed by every separate struggle, and direct the growing movement of the working class against capitalism and for socialism, in the United States and throughout the world.



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