

As teacher struggles spread, unions redouble effort to suppress class struggle

Jerry White
9 March 2018

Protests and demands for strike action by teachers and other school employees are spreading throughout the United States in the aftermath of the nine-day walkout by 33,000 West Virginia educators and public school workers.

Teacher struggles are erupting in Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky and other states, along with Jersey City, New Jersey. Later this month, 30,000 school service employees will vote for strike authorization in the Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second largest school system, serving 734,641 students.

The state affiliates of the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) betrayed and shut down the strike of West Virginia teachers after cutting a deal with billionaire Governor Jim Justice on Tuesday. The bill passed by the state legislature and signed by Justice does nothing to address strikers' main demand: to fully fund the state's public employee medical insurance program and end impossibly high out-of-pocket expenses. To add insult to injury, the meager five percent raise for teachers will be funded through deep cuts in social programs.

The West Virginia strike exposed the unbridgeable gulf between the teachers and the unions. The struggle began as a series of one-day strikes organized independently of the unions in the southern coal counties, which spread to all 55 counties. The unions called a two-day statewide walkout on February 22–23 and then were forced to extend it before suddenly announcing an agreement with Justice and ordering teachers back to work on March 1.

But rank-and-file teachers rebelled and voted to defy union leaders and continue the strike. This came as a shock to the governor and state legislators, with Republican state senate leader Mitch Carmichael

calling the movement “more like an uprising.”

The unions shut down the strike just as it was gaining momentum and inspiring other sections of workers to walk out, including 1,400 Frontier Communications workers in West Virginia and Virginia.

With the *Janus vs. AFSCME* case before the US Supreme Court—which could end the collection of “agency fees” from workers who opt out of the unions—the AFT and NEA were eager to demonstrate to the ruling class their role in suppressing the class struggle.

In a comment cited in the *Washington Post* yesterday, AFT President Randi Weingarten warned the Supreme Court justices that weakening the unions would “lead to more activism and political action” like what happened in West Virginia.

“Collective bargaining exists as a way for workers and employers to peacefully solve labor relations,” said Weingarten, whose annual salary is half a million dollars. In West Virginia, where the collective bargaining structure does not exist, “thousands of teachers mobilized and took on the governor and legislature for their failure to provide teachers with the economic dignity and voice they deserve—and that kind of activism will be multiplied and magnified across the country if collective bargaining is struck down.”

In other words, the unions are crucial in preventing the growth of the class struggle. Weingarten was elaborating on statements made by a union lawyer in oral arguments before the Supreme Court in the *Janus* case: “Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes.”

In an opinion piece, also in the *Washington Post*, Shaun Richman, a former organizing director for the AFT, wrote that the removal of agency fees would imperil the no-strike clauses unions sign with employers in exchange for legal recognition. “The

combination of exclusive union representation, mandatory agency fees, no-strike clauses and ‘management rights’ are the foundation of our peculiar labor relations system,” Richman wrote. “Knock one part out, as the *Janus* plaintiffs aim to do with agency fees, and the whole system can fall apart.

“Employers will not like the chaos that this will bring,” Richman warned, saying workers would “engage in wildcat strikes,” and look to “more left-wing and militant” organizations.

The unions and the Democratic Party are terrified of the growth of the class struggle, among teachers and other sections of the working class, which is threatening to break free of their control.

“Oklahoma teachers have spent a lot of time looking at West Virginia,” Jonathan, a teacher from Oklahoma City, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Absolutely, our struggle is of national importance.”

On Thursday morning, hundreds of teachers in central Kentucky rallied in front of public schools to protest the state legislature’s proposed cuts to retirement benefits, which would slash annual cost-of-living raises by 33 percent for retired teachers, who do not qualify for Social Security benefits. Teachers are discussing a statewide strike to oppose the measure

Late last month, 4,000 teachers in Jersey City, New Jersey voted to strike if no agreement for a new contract is reached with the school district. Teachers want a sharp reduction in out-of-pocket health care costs. Though their contract expired in August 2017, the Jersey City Education Association has kept teachers at work despite the insistence by the school board that it will continue to shift the cost on health care onto the backs of educators.

In Arizona, thousands of teachers showed up to work wearing red to protest low pay. Noah Karvelis, one of the protest organizers and a music teacher in the Littleton Elementary School District, created a closed Facebook group over the weekend called Arizona Teachers United, which grew to more than 11,000 members as of Tuesday evening.

The teachers in West Virginia and other states are rebelling against the decades of labor-management collusion masquerading as “collective bargaining.” Far from advancing the interests of teachers and other school workers, the AFT and NEA have colluded with Democratic and Republican administrations to impose

austerity on behalf of wealthy bondholders and other corporate interests.

Both unions endorsed and collaborated with Obama’s corporate-backed “school reform” agenda, which diverted funds to charter schools and other for-profit business, while wages were cut, and the cost of health care and pensions was shifted from state and local governments onto the backs of workers. They are doing the same with the Trump administration.

The more the working class comes forward, the more violent and determined will be the efforts of the unions to suppress its struggles, and the more apparent will be the need for workers to form independent, rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact