

After nine-day West Virginia strike

# Demands for teacher strike action expand across the US

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In the wake of the nine-day teachers strike in West Virginia, educators throughout the country are taking an independent initiative, organized largely on social media, to stand up against years of concessions and budget cuts.

Strikes are currently threatened in Oklahoma (which saw a 15.6 percent drop in funding since 2008), Arizona (36.6 percent), and Kentucky (5.9 percent).

Most states throughout the US have enacted cuts to per student spending for K-12 education, particularly since 2008—that is, throughout the Obama administration. Hundreds of thousands of educators were laid off, class sizes ballooned, and essential educational programs were cut. Teacher pay and benefits either stagnated or fell under state and local Democratic and Republican politicians.

Far from resisting the assault on public education, the unions, including the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), have suppressed teacher militancy and crushed any strikes. Teachers' long-stifled anger has begun to erupt in a rebellion against the straitjacket of the unions.

## Oklahoma

Oklahoma state workers voted Saturday to join an educators' walkouts now scheduled for April 2 if the state does not meet their demands for pay increases by April 1. State employees, numbering about 32,000, have not had an across-the-board pay increase in 12 years. A quarter of these workers now make less than \$30,000 a year.

Momentum also continues to build among educators in the state, despite the repeated attempts of the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) to rein in growing militancy.

The rising cost of health insurance, as in West Virginia, is a major issue in the threatened strike.

"Oklahoma teachers have spent a lot of time looking at West Virginia as far as the strike goes," Jonathan, a teacher from

Oklahoma City told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "They made a lot of the same arguments at their Capitol as we will have to, come April 2."

After a vote by the state legislature to reject a \$5,000 raise for teachers, "We felt we needed to do something really quickly," Jonathan explained. "The union, the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA), came out with the proposed strike date of April 23, and they got blasted on social media. It was crazy. They actually had to shut down their website because of it. As a result of the backlash, they are now calling [the strike] for April 2."

OEA President Alicia Priest has cited the state's anti-strike laws in effort to thwart the growing strike movement. "The goal is not a walkout," Priest declared. "The goal is for us to have funding for public education to best meet the needs of our students."

It was the dramatic growth of two Facebook groups, Oklahoma Teachers United (OTU) and Oklahoma Teacher Walkout—The Time is Now, that forced the strike date to be moved up to April 2. However, OTU has now counseled its supporters to work with the OEA, a course of action that can only lead to the betrayal of Oklahoma teachers.

## Kentucky

Teachers in Kentucky began protests last Wednesday against Senate Bill 1, which would gut educator retirement. Teachers organized "walk-in" protests at dozens of schools throughout the state beginning Thursday. Hundreds travelled to the Capitol in Frankfort to protest, just a few days following the West Virginia teachers' strike.

On Saturday, Eastern Kentucky educators rallied in Prestonsburg and were joined by West Virginia teachers, according to EKB News. On Sunday, an "Implode SB1 Pension Protection Rally" was held in Frankfort, with other demonstrations scheduled for today.

The senate bill would cut retirees' cost-of-living increases by one-third, cap the use of sick time and adjust retirement benefit formulas to cut benefits. Currently, retired teachers see their checks increased by 1.5 percent annually, substantially below the rate of inflation. The bill would reduce that to a one percent annual increase.

A Kentucky educator, Adam Hyatt, noted on Facebook that the measure would require current teachers with less than 20 years of experience "to work significantly longer to receive full benefits" inevitably causing "bitterness, burnout and anger." He emphasized, "With the lengthening of time of service and the lessening of benefits for future teachers, there will be fewer and fewer talented and motivated people who choose this profession."

Educators in the state are not eligible for Social Security benefits, and the Kentucky pension fund is reportedly underfunded by \$40 billion. Teachers are paying 13 percent from their paychecks, but the state failed to make its matching requirement and reallocated money for the pensions to other programs.

State politicians have now threatened a wide range of budget cuts across most state agencies to supposedly stabilize the pension fund. Hyatt explained, "All sources I've looked at indicated that the lack of funds in the system were the result of years of the legislature misappropriating funds away from pensions... I guess the wealth just isn't intended for us commoners."

On Thursday, Republican Governor Matt Bevin, who supports the bill, called teachers "selfish," alleging they are either "ill-informed" or "willfully blind," He promised to enact the cuts.

While pressure has mounted for a statewide strike, Stephanie Winkler, president of the Kentucky Education Association, told the press that striking is illegal in the state and "We hope it doesn't have to come to that." She went on to insult West Virginia teachers saying, "We're not West Virginia. We're Kentucky. And we are focused on doing our jobs."

## Arizona

Teachers throughout Arizona are set to protest Wednesday at the Capitol over low pay, with further protests scheduled for March 28. Thousands have joined the Facebook group Arizona Teachers United in the aftermath of the West Virginia strike and are likewise demanding a statewide walkout. State politicians are calling for a minuscule one percent raise.

"A lot of teachers want to walk out after spring break," Linda, an Arizona educator, told the WSWS. "Teachers here are dissatisfied and thinking we should follow West Virginia's lead and do what they did." Already enacted state budget cuts

mean that her district will run out of funds for payroll by mid-April, she said, with the district facing receivership.

"Arizona wants to make \$14 million in teacher pay cuts for next year," she added, referring to a current state legislative bill promoted by AT&T, Microsoft and major utilities that would further undermine both teacher pay and municipal budgets.

Dylan, another Arizona educator, expressed his solidarity with teachers around the country. "We drew our inspiration from West Virginia and Oklahoma, and we fully support the actions they are taking."

When adjusted for the cost of living, Arizona teachers are the lowest-paid in the country. Arizona public schools are also notorious for their large student-counselor ratio. While 250-1 is recommended, Arizona schools are 924-1, depriving thousands of young people of college, career and other counseling services.

Teachers entering onto the path of struggle across the US must be warned: the powerful movement of teachers and school employees in West Virginia teachers was consciously betrayed by the corporatist, anti-working class unions, which directed the struggle behind the Democratic Party. It was unsuccessful in securing affordable healthcare, much less the necessary expansion of public education and social services in the state. The inadequate pay raise for public workers is being financed by deep cuts in social programs.

The unions shut down the strike just as it was gaining momentum, precisely to demonstrate to the ruling elites their ability to suppress the class struggle. They worked, in tandem with the Democrats, to demobilize teachers and force a return to work, falsely calling the strike a "victory."

The redistribution of resources to education, healthcare and human need requires the mobilization independent mobilization of the working class, in the US and around the world, based on a socialist program. It is of the greatest urgency that workers form rank-and-file workplace committees to take these struggles out of the hands of the AFT and NEA, organizations which operate entirely in the service of the capitalist profit system.



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