

“Everybody’s skeptical of the task force”

West Virginia teachers angry deal to end strike ignored soaring medical costs

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More than a week has passed since 33,000 West Virginia teachers and other school employees returned to work after a nine-day strike to oppose crushing health care costs and stagnant wages. On Tuesday, March 6, the three main school employee unions—the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV), the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), and the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association (WVSSPA)—announced an agreement with the state’s billionaire governor, Jim Justice, for a paltry 5 percent wage increase.

The strike began not in the union offices, but through discussions of rank-and-file teachers and school workers in the state’s southern coal-mining regions, which have a rich tradition of class struggle and socialism. The unions attempted to end the strike without addressing health care costs and without a vote on February 27, but teachers again met among themselves and all 55 counties voted to continue the strike, which lasted another seven days. In the end, the unions, the state legislature, and the governor forced through the same sellout deal teachers had rejected a week prior.

The wage increase is to be funded not by raising taxes on the billions in profits extracted by the giant coal and natural gas corporations, which control the state (Governor Justice himself, the state’s richest man, is a former coal baron with personal wealth of \$1.6 billion), but rather through cuts to social spending. This includes the cancellation of a free community college tuition program and threatened cuts to Medicaid, the health care program for the poor that one-third of West Virginians rely upon.

The teachers’ central demand for a fix to their underfunded health insurance program, the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA), was completely ignored. Instead, a “task force” has been formed, supposedly to find additional funding for the PEIA by December. Teachers’ health care premiums and other costs have risen year after year.

The task force consists of 29 members who fall into three

major groups: first, state legislators like Republican senate president Mitch Carmichael, Robert Plymale, Democrat, and Republican Craig Blair, all of whom opposed giving teachers even the five percent raise. The second group are executives of billion-dollar health corporations like Andy Paterno of Centurion Insurance Services and Greg Burton of Brookstreet Insurance. The third are union presidents Dale Lee (WVEA), Christine Campbell (WVFT) and Joe White (WVSSPA), the very bureaucrats who ended the strike. One school teacher and one school superintendent are also on the task force, along with a handful of additional corporate representatives.

It should be noted that until September 2017 the PEIA Finance Board included two union leaders: Elaine Harris of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), and Josh Sword, president of the West Virginia AFL-CIO, the labor federation that includes the AFT-WV. This proves that adding union leaders onto the new task force will do nothing to stop the soaring costs of health care for public employees.

Teachers and school workers contacted by the WSWS expressed widespread skepticism about the task force, the promise to fix PEIA, and the entire premise that there is “no money” to fund basic social rights like health care. Chelsea, a teacher from Raleigh County in southern West Virginia, said, “I don’t believe, with the state of our economy, that there is going to be a long-term fix” to PEIA.

“No,” she continued, “it’s a systemic issue. Health care in this country is a problem. The population here in West Virginia is aging, and our health is dwindling. You’ve got an unhealthy system, with unhealthy people.”

West Virginia has the highest rate of obesity in the nation and is at the center of a nationwide opioid addiction epidemic that killed more than 64,000 Americans in 2016. More than half a million West Virginians rely on Medicaid, which does not cover such basic needs as dental or optical health. The decline of the coal industry and resulting lack of jobs has led to an exodus of young people from the state, and

by 2030 one in four residents will be over 65 years old.

“What would solve the crisis is better jobs,” Chelsea said. “I teach in a high poverty area, and most of my kids are on Medicaid. They say that if they can’t balance the budget next year, then cuts to Medicaid is what’s going to be coming.”

Zack, a 24-year-old school custodian, said, “Everybody’s skeptical of the task force. Our union leaders have been put on it, and I hope that they follow through. But they shouldn’t have billion-dollar CEOs on there. And in my opinion, if the union makes a decision it should be based off of a vote of members. We should have had a vote on whether to go back to work, not just a decision made by a few people, whether we like it or not.”

Lynn, a teacher from Logan County in the state’s southern coal fields, said, “When they say they have no money, it’s really that they want to fund other projects that they prefer, like corporate tax cuts, cuts to the [natural gas and coal mining] severance tax. The Republicans opposed any wage increase, and the Democrats were saying that they support us. But it’s true that [former Democratic governor] Earl Tomblin cut lots of taxes for the companies.”

The WSWS Teacher Newsletter fought for teachers and school employees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the WVEA and AFT-WV by electing rank-and-file strike committees to mobilize the broadest support in the working class against the bipartisan assault on public employees and public education. We urged workers to reject the sellout deal reached by the unions and to expand the struggle. The WSWS also drew the political lessons of the strike in order to prepare the next stage of struggle.

The West Virginia teachers’ strike was only the first episode in a continuing wave of social unrest among teachers across the country and around the world. Everywhere, teachers and other workers face an assault on living standards, wages, health care, and access to public education. A West Virginia school bus driver told the WSWS the day before the sell-out, “We’ve opened up the door. And I hope it turns into a humongous gate.”

On Tuesday, following the model of the West Virginia teachers, thousands of striking lecturers and other university staff in the United Kingdom revolted against the University and College Union (UCU), voting amongst themselves to reject the sell-out deal reached by the UCU the previous day. These lecturers are facing deep cuts to their pensions.

Teachers walkouts and other actions are now being planned in Arizona, Oklahoma, Kentucky. In particular, Facebook groups have sprung up, which attract tens of thousands of followers overnight, allowing teachers to discuss demands and strategies directly among the rank-and-file, without mediation from the pro-corporate unions and

mainstream media (although a massive campaign has been undertaken by the federal government and giant tech companies to censor political speech on the Internet). The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association are trying to impose their authority over teachers in these states in order to smother opposition and kill it.

One West Virginia school worker, Beverly Barr, posted the following yesterday on the Facebook group “WV Public Employees United”:

I have been thinking about the results of the strike. I don’t feel like we achieved as much as we hoped. The 5% raise only amounts to around \$2020 per year. Don’t get me wrong, I am grateful for any extra money in my pocket. Our biggest issue was the insurance, which has been constantly costing us more money. Even with health insurance, it seems like going to the doctor is not affordable anymore. PEIA was not fixed. I don’t think we should have backed off on that issue. We chanted “A freeze is not a fix” in the capitol. I thought most of us were committed to that, then we ended up agreeing to this task force. I really hope that it works out, but I honestly fear that it won’t and in 16 months we will be in the same position all over again. Then if we try to strike again, we look like spoiled brats who are going to walk out every time we don’t get what we want. What I did gain from the strike was knowledge..... and what I learned scares me. I learned that our most of our legislators do not respect our profession. I learned that most of them are not willing to help the working class because it conflicts with their loyalties to the gas/oil industry or pharmaceutical companies.

Another worker told the WSWS, “I felt like the union completely betrayed everyone the day they made the joint announcement” with Governor Justice on February 27, calling the workers to return to schools.

“I just kept wondering what must have gone on behind closed doors. I felt sold out. These people need to watch *Matewan* [a film about the Mine Wars in West Virginia]. In order to enact real change, we need to experience some real struggle and sacrifice.” He added that he is, “no longer affiliated with the union. I’m keeping my money.”



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