

Oklahoma Senate rejects pay raise as teachers ready for strike

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With an April 2 strike date by teachers set, the Oklahoma legislature failed to pass a proposed 13 percent across-the-board pay hike for educators. Sentiment for a struggle is growing among teachers in the state for strike action over low wages and abysmal conditions in the schools. Oklahoma teachers have the lowest average pay in the US and have not had a raise in 10 years.

The pay raise bill failed to get the required three-fourth majority to enact a tax increase. The bill contained a combination of regressive tax increases on cigarettes and motor fuel as well as levies on oil and natural gas production. The Senate bill, even if it had been enacted, would have provided for an increase only half the \$10,000 annual raise teachers are demanding.

Following the vote, Oklahoma teachers rallied Thursday at the state capitol in Oklahoma City and in several other cities to voice their demands, which also include lower class sizes and improved health care.

Teachers have established several Facebook pages to press their fight. One group, Oklahoma Teacher Walkout—The Time is Now, has more than 68,000 members. Meanwhile, the Oklahoma City Public Schools and several other districts say they plan to suspend classes for multiple days if teachers walk out on April 2. However, several smaller districts have announced plans to stay open in the event of a strike.

Oklahoma state employees are also advancing their own pay demands. Facing overwhelming sentiment for strike from workers, the Oklahoma State Employees Association board voted to join the teachers' walkout if the legislature does not enact pay raises. There are about 32,000 state workers and they have not had an increase in 12 years, with some 25 percent earning less than \$30,000 annually.

The Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) long

resisted calls for strike action, insisting that teachers continue futile lobbying efforts aimed at pressuring Democratic and Republican state legislators. Finally, the OEA set an April 23 strike date, but then faced a firestorm of opposition from teachers. It was eventually forced to move the strike date up three weeks to early April.

Oklahoma has aggressively slashed education funding as the legislature has handed out tax breaks to business, including the oil and gas sector. The state has cut its state education formula funding by 28 percent since the 2008 financial crash. Some Oklahoma school districts are so hard-pressed for funds that they have cut back to four school days per week.

The *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* recently spoke to Larry Cagle, an Oklahoma City high school English teacher and one of the organizers behind the Facebook group Oklahoma Teachers United (OTU).

“We forced the strike date on the union. We forced it on the superintendents. The rank and file want it, with or without the union,” Cagle said.

He continued, “We are very proud of where we are today, but we don't feel safe, and we don't feel confident. We believe strongly that we must win in Oklahoma. Workers around the nation, not just teachers, are looking at us, and we need to know they have our backs. We are fighting for workers everywhere.”

Cagle told the *Teacher Newsletter* that the OEA had responded angrily to the attempts of his Facebook group to mobilize support for strike action. He noted that when the union lost its attempt to delay strike action until April 23, they “came after me.” He continued, “I've been slandered and lied about, and they've tried intimidation, but our strength is gaining momentum.”

When asked about the role being played by the unions Cagle responded, “Unions are supposed to be militant and unquestionably pro-worker and fighting to the very last drop for workers, and they don’t. They sip on their drinks and have their catered dinners, and they do nothing for the workers.”

Oklahoma teachers should study carefully the lessons of the nine-day strike by 33,000 West Virginia teachers and school employees. The unions opposed the fight of the teachers every step of the way. They blocked a wider mobilization of the working class behind the teachers and tried to shut down the strike on March 1 without attaining any of the strikers’ demands. This prompted a rebellion by rank-and-file educators and the continuation of the strike.

The West Virginia affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, however, managed to regain control and shut the walkout down, just at the point when the struggle was sparking a wider movement, among Frontier Communications workers, and teachers in Kentucky, Arizona, Oklahoma and other states and major cities. Asked by a reporter whether she would call strikes in 49 other states, NEA President Lily Garcia emphatically said, “No.”

The deal brokered by the unions to end the strike abandoned the fight to fully fund teacher health care and called for regressive cuts to Medicaid and other public services in the impoverished state to fund meager 5 percent pay raises.

As for the OEA, it has done nothing to resist the continuing assault on public education in the state, carried out under Republican and Democratic administrations alike. Poverty level salaries have resulted in a teacher shortage, with many non-certified teachers in the schools as a result. The last teacher strike in Oklahoma was in 1990.

The unions cannot be pressured to represent the interests of teachers. To the extent that teachers follow the lead of the OEA their struggle will be betrayed and defeated. The urgent task is the building of new organizations, rank-and-file committees in the schools and communities, independent of the OEA and other unions, to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class to defend the right to high-quality public education and a living wage for teachers and other public employees. This will require a direct assault on

the entrenched wealth and power of the energy giants.

The struggle by Oklahoma teachers is part of a growing movement of school workers against decades of under-funding of education and suppression of teacher salaries.

In Jersey City, New Jersey, 4,100 teachers have been working without a contract since September. The main issue is rising health care costs, which have effectively slashed teachers’ already depressed wages. Citing a \$65 million deficit, the school board has balked at meeting teachers’ demands. Teachers have already voted overwhelmingly for strike authorization.

In Arizona, teachers are preparing for a March 28 day of action at the state capitol that is expected to draw thousands. Per-pupil spending in the state is near the bottom in the US. Arizona children ranked near the bottom nationally in overall well-being. According to the Arizona State University Morrison Institute for Public Policy, the median pay for elementary school teachers was \$42,474 as of 2016, ranking 50th in the nation.

The unions have sought to divert protests behind futile efforts to pressure Democratic Party politicians. The Arizona Education Association even tried to use a recent teacher rally as a platform to announce the campaign for a Democratic candidate for governor.

Meanwhile, in Kentucky, sentiment for strike action is also growing in opposition to the attempts by the Kentucky Education Association to squelch talk of a walkout.

We urge teachers to subscribe to the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter*, which is fighting to provide the leadership and socialist perspective required by educators in uniting their struggles in the US and internationally. The critical question is fusing the fight of teachers with a broader movement of the working class in defense of public education, health care and all basic social rights in opposition to the capitalist profit system.



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