

Teachers in Jersey City begin strike as demands for walkouts expand across the US

Our reporters
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Approximately 4,000 public school workers in Jersey City, the second largest school district in the US state of New Jersey, walked off the job on Friday afternoon. It is the first strike at the city's school system since 1998. In addition to teachers, school staff such as nurses, paraprofessionals, guidance counselors, administrative assistants and others joined the picket line.

The strike is part of a growing wave of working-class opposition in the US and internationally, following the shutdown of the West Virginia teachers strike earlier this month. The teachers' unions ended the West Virginia strike based on a rotten agreement that fails to address rising health care costs and pays for inadequate pay increases through cuts in social programs.

However, the struggle in West Virginia, which temporarily broke out of the straitjacket of the unions, has inspired teachers throughout the country. Strikes of teachers are planned or threatened in Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Kentucky, Tennessee, Colorado and the US territory of Puerto Rico.

The primary demand of Jersey City teachers, like their West Virginian counterparts, centers on the soaring cost of health coverage. Public employees in New Jersey have seen their premiums rise to as much as 35 percent of their salaries following the passage in 2011 of a draconian healthcare and pension "reform" bill known as Chapter 78.

Chapter 78, enacted by then-governor Republican Chris Christie and the Democratic controlled legislature, is New Jersey's version of austerity policies implemented after the 2008 crisis in state capitals around the country, whether headed by Democrats or Republicans.

Nationwide, teachers have seen stagnant pay further eroded by escalating health care premiums, deductibles and co-pays. According to a report published on *Vox*, teachers on average are contributing nearly \$1,500 more per year to premiums than 10 years ago, adjusted for inflation.

The strike in New Jersey exposes the fact that teachers confront as enemies both the Democratic and Republican parties. Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop is considered a rising

star in the Democratic Party. Every time his name was mentioned during a rally Friday afternoon in front of the Board of Education the crowd of striking teachers and supporters booed loudly.

The Jersey City Board of Education called up substitute teachers to cross the picket line and immediately approved a plan as negotiations broke down Thursday night to seek an injunction to force strikers back to work. A court granted the injunction Friday afternoon, rejecting pleas from the union to delay a decision. Teachers now face the possibility of fines or other penalties if they continue to strike on Monday.

Jersey City teachers had been working without a contract since the start of the school year in September. Calls for a walkout reached a fevered pitch during the strike in West Virginia, as the unions sought to prevent a struggle that would unite teachers in different parts of the country. As final efforts by the Board of Education and Jersey City Educational Association (JCEA) for a contract broke down late Thursday, the JCEA could no longer hold off a strike.

Jersey City's education budget faces a \$70 million deficit for the next school year, even if a proposed two percent tax increase goes through. The district has been hit hard by state and federal budget cuts over the past decade. Students in Jersey City and Newark walked out in 2011 to protest cuts to academic and extra-curricular programs.

Schools ordered students to report to school and remain in the auditoriums until an early dismissal at 12:45 pm. However, many parents and students refused to cross picket lines. Students across the district joined their teachers in boisterous rallies outside, just one day after walking out in opposition to gun violence.

Isaiah, a student in Jersey City, told the WSWs that he supports the strike: "They're striking for a better contract, better pay for their jobs. Students think teachers deserve better. Teachers work very hard to supply us with a great education."

Isaac, an eighth-grade student, said, "Students should try to help the teachers, so they get a bigger voice. A lot of students have been talking about the strike, how some

students think it's bad that they're doing it, how we didn't really have school today. We had school, but the teachers weren't teaching at school, they were marching outside."

Strikes and demonstrations of teachers elsewhere in the country include:

* Teachers in the Pennsylvania school district of South Butler, outside of Pittsburgh, began a strike Thursday morning over contract negotiations that have extended four and a half years. The teachers are protesting stagnant wages and soaring health care costs. In late February, the unions prevented a strike by teachers in Pittsburgh, despite an overriding strike authorization vote, to avoid a united struggle of Pittsburgh teachers with the near-by and then on-going strike in West Virginia.

* In Nashville, Tennessee, teachers are opposing a budget with cuts in important programs and that does not include their demand for a five percent pay increase. Teachers, backed by many parents, packed a recent school board meeting to complain of proposed cuts to remedial reading programs and a strategy of shifting Title 1 funds from 49 schools with less than 75% of its students impoverished to 87 schools with a poverty rates of 75%-100% among students.

Teachers are expected to pack the next meeting March 22 when budget discussions continue. The West Virginia strike "had an effect on us," one elementary teacher told the WSWS. "It excited a lot of people, [and] this might be the time to get members more active."

* Teachers in Denver, Colorado held walk-ins at schools Monday and Tuesday over demands for increased pay. "I am making the same amount of money as I did in 2007," Rachel Barnes told the local media. Kevlyn Walsh, a photography and graphic design teacher who also works a second job as a waitress, said she has had to move in with her parents so that she could pay off her student loans. Reportedly second and even third jobs are not uncommon among Denver teachers.

Earlier in the week, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association voted to authorize a strike for next Thursday, should negotiations fail on the current pay-for-performance contract which partially ties wages to test scores and teacher evaluations. On Saturday, however, the union agreed to extend the supplemental contract until next January.

* Teachers in Puerto Rico will hold a one-day strike on Monday, to protest the privatization of public schools following Hurricane Maria.

In Oklahoma, teachers and state workers are planning a walkout on April 2. In Kentucky, teachers staged further protests Friday in the capital of Frankfort against proposed legislation that would gut pensions. In Arizona, teachers are planning a further series of protests over low pay on March 28.

The growing wave of teacher unrest is bringing them into direct conflict with the unions—the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), along with the AFL-CIO apparatus as a whole. These anti-working class, corporatist organizations have overseen four decades of unending betrayals and defeats and have done everything they can to suppress opposition to growing social inequality.

In arguments before the Supreme Court last month, a union lawyer, arguing in defense of arrangements that requires payment of "agency fees"—the equivalent of union dues paid by individuals who do not join the union—articulated the principle of the unions as a whole: "union security is the tradeoff for no strikes." The lawyer, AFSCME's David Frederick, warned the court that without the unions "you can raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country."

This unrest is now developing, and the unions are seeking to isolate and suppress whatever struggles break out. In West Virginia, the unions shut down the strike just at the point when it was threatening to develop into a broader movement of the working class as a whole. They then worked, in tandem with the Democrats, to falsely call the strike a "victory."

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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