

US, Caribbean, Africa, Latin America and Europe

# Global struggles by teachers mounting against austerity and attacks on public education

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The movement of teachers throughout the United States is continuing to expand. Educators in Kentucky are converging on the state capitol in Frankfort today to protest pension cuts, and teachers in Arizona and Oklahoma are preparing for mass protests and statewide strikes on March 28 and April 2.

On Monday, thousands of educators carried out a one-day strike in Puerto Rico to oppose plans, backed by Trump's billionaire Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, to expand for-profit charter schools. The island's governor, Ricardo Roselló, is proposing to close 300 public schools and wipe out 7,000 teachers' jobs. Carrying signs such as "They believe in money, not education," thousands marched to the capitol building in San Juan as calls for an island-wide strike mounted.

Teachers in Prince George's County, Maryland began work-to-rule and sickout protests this week over pay; hundreds of students protested faculty cuts at Treasure Valley Community College in Ontario, Oregon; adjunct professors and other non-tenured-track faculty at Loyola University in Chicago are threatening to strike on April 4.

The struggles in the US are part of a global struggle of educators against the austerity demanded by the international banks and capitalist governments all over the world. There are ongoing struggles in Kenya, Nigeria and other African countries. In Latin America, after a two-day national strike by Argentinian teachers earlier this month, teachers in Mexico are planning an April 9-10 national strike to overturn the government's free market "education reforms." Last week, thousands of teachers on the Caribbean island of Jamaica held "sick-outs" to demand higher wages and allowances for books and software.

In Europe, Dutch teachers from four provinces struck last week and protested in Amsterdam, while teachers in Slovenia walked out to demand higher wages and better working conditions. University lecturers in the United Kingdom have engaged in a month-long series of rolling

strikes and rebelled last week against efforts by the unions to impose a sellout agreement that betrayed their fight against pension cuts and casualization.

Over 850 administrative, technical, library, counseling and athletic staff are continuing a two-week strike at Carleton University in Canada's capital city of Ottawa.

The international scope of these struggles underscores the common problems teachers, school employees, and university workers confront in every country ten years since the global financial meltdown, which led to campaigns of savage austerity by capitalist governments around the world that continue today.

While the Obama administration and governments around the world handed over trillions to bail out the financial criminals responsible for the crash and re-inflate the stock market bubbles, entire countries, states and municipalities were driven to near bankruptcy. This crisis was used to accelerate the destruction of public employee jobs, loot health and pension funds and implement privatization schemes to turn public education and other critical social infrastructure into moneymaking operations.

In the US, funding for public education in most states still lags behind pre-2008 levels. Over the last decade, teachers have suffered a five percent decline in real wages and a nine percent *increase* in medical costs, adjusted for inflation. Obama oversaw the destruction of 300,000 school employee jobs and a vast expansion of for-profit charter schools. Now Trump is demanding billions in federal school spending cuts and school vouchers to divert money from public schools to religious schools and private education businesses.

Educators are deeply committed to the egalitarian ideals embodied in public education and opposed to efforts to create a class-based education system. They are also intimately aware of the impact of social inequality, growing poverty and the danger that the children they teach could be dragged off to war.

The nine-day strike of 33,000 teachers and school

employees in West Virginia was betrayed by the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state affiliates, which are determined to prevent a unified struggle of educators and other sections of the working class. The deal the unions cut with the state's billionaire governor, Jim Justice, does nothing to address the teachers' main demand: to fully fund the public employee insurance agency and stop crippling out-of-pocket costs. The meager five percent raise will not be paid for by increasing taxes on the state's coal, natural gas and chemical giants, but through deep cuts in other essential services.

However, the West Virginia strike, which temporarily broke free from the control of the unions, inspired educators throughout the US and the world. Underscoring the global character of this struggle, the most popular social media posts during the walkout were messages of class solidarity from teachers in Ghana, Australia and other countries.

On the eve of the teacher protests in Kentucky, the Republican-controlled state senate unveiled a new budget, which includes Governor Matt Bevin's cuts while rejecting any tax increases on corporate interests. The cuts will hit state universities and will continue to deplete the teachers' health care and pension funds, a move that all but guarantees further cuts. At the same time, state senators proposed a derisory increase in the per-pupil funding formula for K-12 schools to \$3,984 in Fiscal Year 2019 and \$3,985 in Fiscal Year 2020, keeping Kentucky near the bottom in the United States.

Several school districts, mostly in the state's eastern coal mining counties, have announced they will close today because teachers are protesting at the state capitol in Frankfurt. In addition to other cuts, Governor Bevin is pushing a measure, Senate Bill 1, which would reduce annual cost-of-living increases on teachers' pensions from 1.5 percent to 1 percent. For teachers, who do not qualify for Social Security, the result would be a loss of \$62,000 in income over a lifetime. SB 1 would also increase future health care contributions and end defined-benefit plans for future teachers.

Just as the strike in neighboring West Virginia inspired teachers around the country and the world, the fight in Kentucky to defend current and future educators is also generating widespread support. "We absolutely stand with Kentucky teachers," an elementary school teacher in Nashville, Tennessee, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "We are watching every state where teachers are under attack. Each instance only strengthens our resolve to fight for educator rights at the local, state and national level. When one group of our sisters and brothers are being abused, we are all being abused."

In Oklahoma, momentum is building for a statewide walkout on April 2 to demand a \$10,000 raise for some of the lowest-paid teachers in the nation. The strike movement was initiated by rank-and-file teachers, using social media, who rejected efforts by the Oklahoma Education Association to block or delay a walkout. School is presently suspended for April 2 in districts that serve 70 percent of Oklahoma students, according to the Facebook page, "The Time is Now."

"As cost of living continues to rise my teaching salary has not," Lisa Price posted on the page. "I haven't had a raise in 11 years. But 7 years ago, I started working a second job to help fill in the gap. I shouldn't be denied a raise nor have to beg for a raise nor walk off the job after 11 years of being an experienced and highly effective teacher with a college degree when our legislators are getting raises each year and our GPT (Gross Production Tax on new oil and gas wells) is 2%. This is exploitation of teachers."

Teachers and school employees in Jersey City, New Jersey returned to work Monday after the Jersey City Education Association (JCEA) shut down a one-day strike against soaring health care costs imposed by a 2011 state law passed by the Democratic-controlled state legislature and signed by the Republican governor.

As teachers returned to work, they expressed their anger over being ordered back to their classrooms without ever seeing the details of the agreement, let alone having a chance to vote on it. "I am frustrated at going back today," an English teacher with seven years told the WSWS. "It is similar to what happened in West Virginia. The details on pay were emphasized by the mayor but not for health care, which is our greatest concern. We have a right to see it and vote."

A special education teacher for 15 years added, "We want health care and a raise, or we should not go back to work. We should go back on strike if we don't like the agreement. Teachers are not even middle class. Teachers are poor."

Damian Williams, a ninth grader, said he had marched last Friday with many other students to support the striking teachers. "I was for the strike because teachers need to be able to teach." Another student added, "Teachers should have their health care. They are underpaid for what they give us. This is an economically divided society."



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