

As April 2 strike by Oklahoma educators looms

## Arizona teachers prepare for mass statewide demonstrations

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Thousands of Arizona teachers demanding improved wages and conditions are expected to converge on the state Capitol in Phoenix tomorrow. Despite the efforts of the teacher unions to block the spread of strikes and protests after their betrayal of the nine-day strike in West Virginia, educators throughout the US and internationally are pressing ahead with their opposition to austerity and attacks on public education.

Teachers in the Phoenix area will be holding what they call a “teach-in” in front of the Capitol building as teachers continue protests in other parts of the state. Arizona Educators United, the Facebook group teachers are using to organize, told local news station KTAR News, “We’re going to do what we do best, we’re going to teach.”

Teachers are scheduled to march on the Capitol at 4 p.m. to bring attention to unsustainable salaries. According to the Arizona State University Morrison Institute for Public Policy, the median pay for elementary teachers was \$42,724 in 2016, ranking last in the country.

The protest follows almost a month of activity by Arizona teachers, bolstered by the West Virginia strike, which temporarily broke free from the control of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), as well as rank-and-file agitation, primarily through social media, for an April 2 statewide strike in Oklahoma.

On March 7, the #RedForEd movement began when teachers wore red to bring attention to the issues they face. The Arizona Education Association (AEA) has sought to hijack this movement and subordinate it to maneuvers with state Democrats and impotent appeals to pressure Republican Governor Doug Ducey. Earlier this month, about 300 teachers gathered outside KTAR News 92.3 FM to call for higher wages while Ducey was being

interviewed inside.

On March 21, teachers in the Pendergast Elementary District organized a sickout, largely outside of the control of the AEA and AFT state affiliate, causing nine schools to cancel classes for the day. Only three of the district’s 12 schools had enough teachers to remain open as teachers descended on the state Capitol to protest.

In Arizona, 24 percent of children live in high-poverty areas. The state’s per student spending is just over \$4,000, one of the lowest in the country. A 2016 report by the US Department of Education found that Arizona spends \$20,000 more annually on each inmate than it does on a student in its school system. From 1989-2013, spending for public education virtually remained flat while funding for prisons skyrocketed by 90 percent.

“My focus for this movement is my students. They don’t have fully funded classrooms, highly qualified teachers are leaving them, their class sizes are too large, and they don’t have resources,” organizer Kara Nakamura said on Facebook.

Many school districts have sought to make up for the teacher shortage by hiring largely inexperienced instructors from temporary labor and staffing agencies. According to the *Arizona Republic*, the Murphy Elementary School District in Phoenix sought to slash \$2.2 million from its budget deficit by canceling contracts for temporary teachers leading to class sizes of 40 plus. Only 55 percent of long-term substitute teachers in the district had full teaching credentials in the 2016-17 school year.

While Arizona teachers protest Wednesday, the Oklahoma Education Association and AFT affiliate are trying to stop a scheduled April 2 statewide strike by backing a Democratic-sponsored bill that would fund a wage increase for Oklahoma teachers through imposing a

series of regressive consumption taxes on economically struggling working-class families. The multi-billion-dollar oil and gas industry, which has benefited from huge tax cuts granted by the state's Republican governor, Mary Fallin, would see a minuscule tax increase, from 2 to 5 percent, solely on new oil and gas wells.

The union-backed deal, which would raise wages—near the bottom in the US—by a one-time \$6,000 instead of the \$10,000 Oklahoma teachers are demanding does next to nothing to raise wages for school personnel and other public employees. It also does not address per pupil school funding, which has seen among the biggest cuts in the nation since the 2008 crash and led last year to 20 percent of the state's districts reducing classes to four days a week.

The bill passed the state House of Representatives last night, with the backing of 51 of 73 Republicans and all 28 Democrats, and was hailed as a “step in the right direction” by Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) President Alicia Priest.

Rank-and-file teachers have largely responded to the proposal with contempt. On the Oklahoma Teachers United Facebook page, which has publicly criticized the OEA-backed deal, teachers expressed their determination to strike, along with public employees, on April 2. They also denounced the efforts by the unions to divide educators, with one teacher, Kasey Rachelle Holman, noting if the union shut down the strike on the basis of this rotten deal, “The OEA will just have more angry members leaving!!”

Teacher Sala Wood said: “That raise would be about, what...\$375 a month after taxes? That's not even the point...there's no mention of education funding. HUGE fail!”

Gail Thompson commented: “Our kids are worth more. Stop making excuses and stand up for our future! We walk for them!”

Christen Nicole Rowland added: “You tried to put a band-aid on a severed artery. It's not going to help schools get to where they need. This deal isn't going to shut us down, do more!!”

Others commented on the impact of chronic underfunding in the classroom. Irene Casey posted: “I have students ask me daily- “why can't we....” how many creative ways can a teacher tell her science students ‘we don't have the supplies to do the same simple experiments I did in school... many years ago!!!!’ FUND OUR FUTURE!!!”

Robin Gillean Davis added: “Fully fund our schools

again! If your children were in our schools would you be okay with just a class set of old books instead of a book for each student? Would you be okay with stained carpet duct taped together? Would you be okay with buckets sitting under leaks when it rains? Would you be okay with choir, drama and other electives being eliminated? Of course, you would not be okay with any of this if it was your children. Our students are your constituent's children and they are our state's future and are worth so much more than you have been giving. Step up and show Oklahoma students and teachers that they are valued!!”

Cynthia Davis Jones said: “Fund the schools and give teachers \$10,000 raise. Give retirees a pay increase. Give state employees a raise. Stop making excuses. Restore the GPT [Gross Production Tax on the oil and gas industry] to 7% and do whatever it takes to generate enough income to bring our state to a TOP 5 state,” while Terry Pace added, “Yes 10-12% GPT seems by far the most fair and effective.”

The struggle of teachers, which is erupting worldwide with strikes in Brazil, France and northern Iraq over the last week alone, has thrown educators into a political clash with all the political parties, including the Democrats and Republicans in the US, which are slashing education and other essential services to pay for corporate tax cuts and war.

In Arizona, Oklahoma, Kentucky and other states, teachers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions, which are inseparably tied to the two big-business parties and their austerity program. This means electing rank-and-file committees in the schools and communities to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class to defend the right to high-quality public education, which will only be funded through a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth of the corporate and financial elite.



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