

Arizona teachers protest as Oklahoma educators battle union sabotage

Jerry White
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Thousands of Arizona teachers and their supporters marched on the state capitol in Phoenix yesterday. Others held protests in Tucson, Yuma and other cities to demand higher wages and increased school funding in the western US state.

The protests took place on the eve of a planned April 2 statewide teachers' strike in Oklahoma and is part of wave of struggles by educators spreading across the US and internationally since the nine-day teachers' strike in West Virginia.

The Day of Action in Phoenix was called by teachers organized on the Facebook pages Arizona Educators United—which has nearly 40,000 members—and Save Our Schools Arizona, a group opposing a law to expand school vouchers. The Arizona Education Association (AEA) and Arizona Federation of Teachers (AFT) have professed support for the protesting teachers in order to contain opposition and smother it. However, rank-and-file teachers have engaged in protests at the capitol and sickouts in west Phoenix and parts of Glendale. There is a growing demand for a statewide strike.

Median pay for Arizona teachers is last in nation, at \$42,730 a year. Democrats and Republicans have also slashed school spending since the 2008 financial crash, and the state is currently ranked 49th in the nation for per pupil spending, just behind Oklahoma. While refusing to reverse decades of corporate tax cuts implemented by both parties, Republican Governor Doug Ducey authorized a 1 percent raise for teachers in the current budget year and plans another 1 percent next year.

Chanting “Overworked and Underpaid,” teachers wearing RedForEd t-shirts and carrying homemade signs with slogans like “Stop Shortchanging Our Future: Fund Education,” marched around the capitol Wednesday. During a rally, one of the leaders of Arizona Educators United, Noah Karvelis, an elementary school music teacher in the Phoenix suburb of Tolleson, read the group's demands.

They include a 20 percent pay raise, yearly pay raises, step increases for experience and educational degrees, the

restoration of funding to pre-2008 levels and no new tax cuts. Karvelis said that if the legislature did not agree to the demands there would be “an escalation of actions.” He added: “If we have to, we will strike,” to the cheers of teachers and their supporters.

There were also illusions, no doubt encouraged by the unions, in the Democratic state legislators, who have professed support for the teachers. But the funding crisis in Arizona, like the rest of the country, is the product of decades of corporate tax cuts and school defunding carried out by both parties. This includes former Democratic Governor Janet Napolitano, who signed a \$500 million tax cut in 2006 only to slash hundreds of millions from education and other essential programs after the financial crash in 2008.

Jonni Santschi is a high school teacher in North Phoenix who has taught in several states, including Missouri and California. She told the WSWs, “I have a master's degree in psychology and 20 years of experience in behavioral psychology, and I'm barely making \$40,000. Last year, we had half of the teachers quit because of pay.”

“We teach because we love it. We love the kids and the families, but it's becoming a nightmare. We don't want to be rich. All we want is a livable wage and compensation for all our student loans. My mother was a long-time teacher in Tucson, and I remember her striking and sacrificing when I was a little girl. But the unions are useless now. They are not doing anything. The AEA is supposed to be our voice. But it's not. That's why we're raising our own voices.”

Referring to high levels of social inequality and poverty, which has produced 30,000 homeless students in the state, Jonni said, “You have open homelessness in Arizona because of the warm weather, with people living in their cars. You never know when a child is living in those conditions. With a background in mental health, I'm trained to find out and help.”

Economists estimate Arizona would have more than \$4 billion more a year in revenue had it not cut taxes over the past 20 years for Fortune 500 companies like Phoenix-based

Avnet, the world's largest distributor of electronic components; multi-national mining giant Freeport-McMoRan (which acquired Phelps Dodge Copper in 2007); and waste management firm Republic Services.

While teachers marched on the capitol earlier this month, the state Senate Finance Committee was discussing cutting taxes on capital gains, which would benefit Arizona's 183 millionaires even as the state continued to run, as one researcher said, a "permanent austerity budget."

In Oklahoma, Democratic state legislators and the two teachers unions—the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and the Oklahoma Federation of Teachers (OFT)—are trying to head off a statewide strike by teachers and public employees scheduled for next Monday, April 2. The OEA reluctantly agreed to back the action after tens of thousands of educators, organized through Facebook pages Oklahoma Teachers United and Oklahoma Teacher Walkout—the Time is Now, pressed for a statewide strike.

Last week, the OEA and OFT put forward a "roadmap" to Republican Governor Mary Fallin and the state legislature to prevent the strike, which called for a \$10,000 raise over three years. This would be paid for largely through regressive consumption taxes that would hit working-class residents the hardest, combined with a small increase in taxes on the oil and gas industry.

On Wednesday night, the State Senate voted 36-10 to back a bill passed by the State House of Representatives earlier in the week by a 79-19 margin. The bill only provides a one-time \$6,000 raise and does nothing to reverse the decades-long school funding cuts, which have led to larger class sizes, fewer supplies and four-day class schedules in some districts.

The funding proposal is based on the unions' recommendations and will include regressive taxes on motor fuel, cigarettes and motel and hotel fees, and a modest increase in the Gross Production Tax on new oil and gas wells. The latter will rise from 2 to 5 percent, although it had long been 7 percent before Governor Mary Fallin cut it.

Democrats and Republicans hailed the deal as "historic," and the governor has scheduled a signing party today.

After the initial proposal was met with derision by rank-and-file teachers who also threatened to quit the unions if they did not come out in favor of the planned teacher walkout, OEA President Alicia Priest took a cautious approach. While saying the bill was a "step in the right direction," she added that the walkout would still go on, although teachers "might be saying 'thank you'" if the governor had signed the bill by then.

The equivocation by the OEA was met with a torrent of denunciations by Democrats and Republicans who backed the bill, and Priest changed her tune on Wednesday night,

making it clear the union wants to prevent an open-ended strike and turn Monday's action into an impotent day of lobbying.

The passage of the bill, she said, "is a truly historic moment in Oklahoma," that provided a "historic investment of half a billion dollars that will benefit a generation of Oklahoma students and will be felt in every community across the state... There is still work to do to get this legislature to invest more in our classrooms. That work will continue Monday when educators descend on the Capitol."

In Facebook postings, teachers denounced the proposal. Aurora Lora posted: "This bill is not enough. We cannot stop fighting for what our schools deserve because they threw us some breadcrumbs. Giving a \$1,250 raise to support staff is insulting and does not bring them up to a living wage. The amount for 'textbooks and instructional materials' would not even fund a new math textbook adoption for the state—something the state cancelled two years ago because we had no money. Shame on any education leader who thinks this is good enough and that we should settle for less than what we deserve. I'll see you all out on the picket line this Monday!"

Another post on the Oklahoma Teachers United read, "The bond between the teachers will not be broken by a union seeking to divide us. Teachers stand united!"

These developments underscore the need for rank-and-file teachers to decisively break with all of the unions, which do everything they can to suppress the class struggle. Teachers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands.

In every school and community, rank-and-file committees should be elected to mobilize the entire working class to fight for the right to quality education, livable wages and fully funded health care and pension benefits for teachers and all school employees. This will require a struggle against both big business parties and the capitalist profit system they defend.

The author also recommends:

The struggle of teachers cannot be isolated! For a united movement of the entire working class!

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