

“This is not just about raises, it is about restoring funding”

Oklahoma teachers reject funding bill, prepare to strike

Jerry White, Todd Denton
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Oklahoma teachers have reacted with disgust and anger over the pay offer and the school-funding bill signed into law by Republican Governor Mary Fallin Thursday afternoon. Teachers are preparing for a statewide strike by over 40,000 educators on Monday, April 2.

While the governor praised the bipartisan deal for giving teachers the “largest raise in Oklahoma history,” the one-time increase of between \$5,000 to \$7,000, depending on years of service, will do little for teachers who are ranked 49th in the nation in pay. Teachers have not had a raise in a decade even as they have borne higher out-of-pocket costs for health care and pensions.

The \$474 million funding package adopts proposals by the teachers union and state Democrats to pay for the raise through a series of regressive taxes, including a one-dollar increase on cigarettes, increases in gasoline and diesel fuel taxes, plus a small tax increase on new oil and gas wells. This amount, however, will not even put a dent in the billions of dollars both parties have cut from public education over the last decade.

Between 2008 and 2018, under both Fallin and her Democratic predecessor, Brad Henry, Oklahoma’s per pupil funding fell by 28 percent, more than any other state in the US. Oklahoma now spends \$1,000 less per child than it did 10 years ago, according to the Center of Budget and Policy Priorities. Due to these cuts, 20 percent of the state’s schools have been forced to adopt a four-day schedule.

While claiming there were no resources for public education, let alone pay raises, the Democrats and Republicans over the last decade have handed billions of dollars in tax breaks to the state’s energy corporations.

Inspired by the nine-day strike of West Virginia teachers, which temporarily broke free from the control of the unions, tens of thousands of teachers joined the

Facebook pages “Oklahoma Teachers United” and “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout-The Time is Now!” to demand open-ended strike action until they win a \$10,000 pay raise and full funding for public education.

While unable to call the strike off, the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are opposed to an extended strike, which would reinvigorate opposition throughout the country. Like their counterparts in West Virginia, union officials are already using the threat of potential fines or disciplinary action, and claims that a prolonged strike would alienate the public, to counter the militant sentiments of teachers. At the same time, OEA and AFT officials are boosting illusions that lobbying the legislators after teachers return to school will bear fruit.

After the Senate passed the bill Wednesday night, OEA President Alicia Priest called the sham a “great victory,” while acknowledging “it might not be everything that we want.” She went on to patronize teachers, saying, “Because you made your voice heard and fought with such compassionate courage we now have a bipartisan deal that will give teachers an average \$6,000 raise.”

Aware of the deep opposition among teachers, Priest added, “I know you may be disappointed like me that the legislature left money on the table.” She acknowledged that the funding measure would do nothing to address the shortage of textbooks, four-day weeks and overcrowded classes. Nor did it restore the 28 percent funding cut carried out over the last decade. “We must ensure every student has the resources they need. That’s why we will be in the capitol on April 2. The OEA will support teachers for as long as they want to stay at the capitol.”

Rank-and-file teachers rejected the claims of “historic” victories and took to the Oklahoma Teachers United page to post their opposition. Travis Hathcote wrote: “This

afternoon Guymon teachers and support staff came together and by a significant majority voted to reaffirm our support of a walkout! Proud of our staff and thankful for our supportive administration and school board. This is not just about raises, it is about restoring funding!"

Karen Cavanaugh-Wellner, wrote, "Many of the Mustang teachers are just sick! We were told by our superintendent today that we will be out Monday but he expects school as usual on Tuesday. They he sent a survey asking if we were going to be in school Tuesday."

Steven Rhoden, a paraprofessional in special education at an elementary school in Tulsa, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that teachers are not happy with the deal, and paraprofessionals and support staff would get little if anything. "Teachers are in the profession because they want to be and feel a calling to their work. They are taken advantage of because of their high level of commitment. It is the kids that make it worthwhile, but the longer teachers are in the profession, the harder it is to keep going."

Steven said the number of paraprofessionals has consistently fallen, even as demand for their services grows. As a special education helper, he said he does not see how teachers can handle what they're asked to do. Class sizes have gotten so large, even in special education classrooms, that education is often difficult to achieve.

A teacher in Anadarko, in south central Oklahoma, told the WSWS that teachers feel "sold out." The legislators, he said, "have already cut some funding they agreed to 48 hours ago." As for the unions, he added, "I don't see how they could have the best interest of education or children in mind, when we've had to wait 10 years for this. Why wait for things to get so critical?"

Earlier this week, thousands of teachers in Arizona marched to demand a 20 percent wage increase and full funding for education. Linda, an elementary school teacher in Phoenix, told the WSWS, "Teachers here want to walk out too. It's happening worldwide. They treat us awfully here. We're number 48 for school funding and at the bottom for pay. We teach poor kids, who come from the projects and face poverty, drugs and gangs, and instead of giving us more resources they blame the teachers for the educational problems, saying we're not motivated enough.

"Now the governor wants to bring in uncertified teachers and military veterans, so they can pay them less and systematically destroy education. Teachers want the pay they deserve and they're willing to fight for it."

From the very beginning, the struggle in Oklahoma, as

in West Virginia, Kentucky, Arizona and other states, has been initiated by rank-and-file educators sick of decades of union-backed concessions and complicity in budget-cutting.

In February, teachers in the West Virginia coalfields launched wildcat strikes, forcing the state affiliates of the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to call a statewide strike and then extend it. When the unions cut a deal with the state's billionaire governor and ordered strikers back to work, teachers and school employees came together on the picket lines, at the state capitol and online to vote to defy the unions and continue the strike.

The fatal weakness of that struggle, however, was that rank-and-file teachers did not build up the necessary organizations, free from the control of the unions, to take the struggle forward and mobilize the broadest support in the working class to fight the gang-up of the two big-business parties and the powerful corporate interests behind them. This enable the unions to reassert their control, smother opposition and impose essentially the same deal the teachers first rejected.

The five percent pay raise for West Virginia teachers did nothing to address the strikers' main demand to fully fund health care and end crushing out-of-pocket expenses. To make matters worse, the meager pay increase will be funded through slashing other essential services, including potential cuts to Medicaid for the low-income children the teachers serve.

Oklahoma teachers must learn these lessons and decisively break with all the strikebreaking unions. Rank-and-file committees must be elected in every school and community to mobilize the entire working class behind this fight. The strike and mass protests on Monday should be used to discuss and debate a strategy to launch an industrial and political counteroffensive against the bipartisan attack on public education.

The only way to guarantee the social right to quality public education and a living wage, health care and a comfortable retirement for educators is by carrying out a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate and financial elite.



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