

Wildcat sickouts hit Kentucky as teachers' struggle spreads

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The WSWS urges teachers in Kentucky and throughout the US and internationally to sign up for the WSWS Teacher Newsletter to receive updates on the expanding struggle.

Thousands of teachers in Kentucky staged wildcat sickouts Friday, closing schools in 29 counties. The protests were in opposition to a bill passed by state legislators Thursday night that includes a sweeping assault on teachers' pensions.

The eruption in Kentucky is part of an expanding wave of strikes and protests by educators across the United States and internationally. Oklahoma teachers will hold a statewide strike this Monday to demand wage and school funding increases, while teachers in Arizona are calling for walkouts in the wake of the nine-day February-March strike by 30,000 West Virginia teachers and school employees.

The struggles by teachers are developing in opposition to the trade unions, which have suppressed the class struggle and enforced funding cuts by both parties for three decades. The unions are now doing everything they can to smother opposition, isolate teachers and prevent them from linking up across states.

The pension "reforms," passed in a nearly party-line vote with Republican support, were inserted into a bill on sewerage system funding and rammed through the day before spring break to limit the impact of popular opposition.

The full consequences are still emerging. For teachers hired after January 1, 2019, the bill removes the "inviolable contract" clause, which guarantees that a teacher's pension cannot be changed from the amount set at the time they were hired. The change paves the way for deep cuts for current teachers. Governor Matt Bevin, who will now sign the bill into law, gloated in a tweet Thursday night that the population "owes a deep debt of gratitude" to the legislators who had "voted not to keep

kicking the pension problem down the road."

In addition, rather than being able to retire after 27 years of service, as at present, future teachers will have to work until they are 65 or until the total of their age plus years of service equals 87. Teachers will reportedly also have to contribute an extra three percent of their salaries to the fund and will no longer be allowed to use accrued sick days for their retirement.

The two pension funds for teachers and public employees, which were fully funded in the early 2000s, have developed multibillion-dollar deficits because successive governments, under Democratic and Republican governors, have underfunded them in every budget for 15 of the last 22 years.

The Kentucky Education Association (KEA) has opposed any walkouts from the outset, instead seeking to channel opposition behind the dead end of electing Democrats in the November 2018 midterm elections and 2019 gubernatorial election. On Thursday night, KEA president Stephanie Winkler told teachers protesting at the state capitol in Frankfort to tell their colleagues: "There will be no more votes like that after November."

But the teachers took action into their own hands, organizing sickouts independently of the union. Renee, a teacher in Fayette County, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "This was done individually, no movement, not with the suggestion of the KEA... Fayette County is the second largest district after Jefferson County, and we both shut down. Twenty-six plus districts also walked out and shut down. We have a great deal of power with or without our teacher association reps' support or leadership."

The teachers have been joined by students, who walked out of classrooms on Friday in several counties, including Wolfe and Breahitt County. Students in Wolfe rallied outside the school and chanted, "We support our teachers!" and "A pension is a promise!"

Teachers have posted on the KEA Facebook page

demanding strike action. “It’s time to STRIKE and stop talking!!!!,” one teacher wrote. “I have 193 sick days to use for a state wide walk out! Waiting and watching is too little, too late. We need to be proactive,” wrote another.

A third teacher’s comment, which was “liked” by 14 others, stated: “The teachers of this state want to STRIKE! We need MAXIMUM public pressure to be applied by the state legislature.”

The KEA is desperate to regain control of the situation and smother the teachers’ anger. Winkler held a press conference on Friday afternoon and called for yet another protest at the capitol on Monday. She declared that the union would do nothing to oppose the pension attacks, instead instructing teachers to turn to calling and emailing legislators for the upcoming state budget. “If this budget is not in the best interest of public education, students and the public service, then we will react,” she said.

When a reporter asked whether the KEA supported teachers’ closure of schools that day, Winkler said that the sickouts were “unfortunate.” She admitted that the union “can’t control what individual teachers do... It was their decision, it was very organic, and it was very unfortunate that that’s what had to occur.”

To carry forward their fight, Kentucky teachers must study the lessons of the nine-day strike by West Virginia school workers, who courageously defied the union’s order to return to work and organized to continue their strike. The union was eventually able to regain control of the movement, however, and impose a sellout agreement that did nothing to address teachers’ central demand for healthcare funding.

To prevent the isolation and suppression of their struggle, the WSWs calls on Kentucky teachers to form democratically elected rank-and-file committees in schools in every county, independent of the unions. These committees should establish contact with workers in Arizona and Oklahoma and organize a unified fight.

There is enormous support for a full mobilization of all teachers and other sections of the working class. Nicole, a teacher in West Virginia’s southern Mercer county, told the WSWs: “I’m hoping that Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arizona, that they will find strength. People are looking to their courage and getting inspired by that. Go ahead and make your local plans. Have your sickouts and walkouts and rallies. Don’t let the people that are supposed to be your leadership stifle that. Obviously, years and years of lobbying and phone calls and emails have done nothing to curb the problem.”

Nicole added: “I would encourage you to seek as many

communication outlets as you can. To use phone trees, text trees, and any way to get that message out. Like with most things in life, you feel like you are struggling alone. You feel like you are the only one experiencing whatever madness there is, until you vocalize it and someone else says, ‘me too.’ I thought my problems were an individual failing and not a societal one. We have allowed the ultra-wealthy to control everything.”

Kentucky teachers should reject the union’s attempt to channel their fight behind the false friends of the Democratic Party. It was the Democratic Governor Steve Beshear who from 2007 to 2015 oversaw more than \$1.6 billion in cuts to the state budget, including starving teachers’ pension funds. From 2008 to 2018, per-pupil state education funding, adjusted for inflation, declined by 16 percent. And it was the Obama administration that oversaw the wiping out of over 400,000 teachers’ jobs and the spread of charter schools.

Teachers should reject the lie, promoted by Democrats and Republicans, that there is “no money” for a well-funded retirement for the working class, healthcare or decent wages. Both these parties reject any impingement on the profit interests of the corporate elite, including the giant mining and energy corporations that have made billions in profits over decades and have now left working-class areas of eastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia in ruins.

Instead, the Democrats’ proposal for raising revenue, championed by Attorney General Andy Beshear—the former governor’s son—is to reintroduce gambling and prey on the social misery among thousands of working-class families, including parents of many of the students teachers see every day.

The development of a movement in defense of the social right to public education raises the question of which social class decides how society’s wealth is distributed: the working class, the overwhelming majority that produces all of society’s wealth, or a tiny layer of corporate billionaires. The reorganization of society according to social needs and genuine equality means the fight for socialism.



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