

Build rank-and-file committees to unite with teachers in Arizona and Kentucky!

Mobilize the working class behind striking Oklahoma educators!

The Socialist Equality Party

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A PDF leaflet version of this article is available here for printing and distribution. The WSWS urges teachers in Oklahoma and throughout the US and internationally to sign up for the WSWS Teacher Newsletter to receive updates on the expanding struggle.

Tens of thousands of striking Oklahoma teachers and school employees are converging in the state capital Monday to demand higher wages and increased school funding. They have rejected the bipartisan bill passed Thursday night that includes an insulting \$6,000 one-off pay increase and a small increase in school funding that will not make a dent in the billions of dollars that have been cut from education over the past decade.

The statewide strike in Oklahoma is part of an expanding wave of struggles by educators across the United States and internationally. On Friday, teachers in Kentucky rejected the union's proposal that they do nothing in the face of severe cuts to pensions, organizing wildcat sickouts and closing schools in 29 counties. Thousands will demonstrate in Frankfort today, and demands are growing for a strike.

Educators in Arizona, where median pay is last in the nation, are calling for a statewide strike following a demonstration last Wednesday for wage and school funding increases. The movement of teachers, which erupted with the nine-day walkout in West Virginia last month, has also spread to Colorado, New Jersey and other states, plus the US territory of Puerto Rico.

The National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are opposed to an extended strike in Oklahoma, which would galvanize opposition throughout the country. The unions are seeking to send teachers back to work after a one-day strike that will resolve nothing. They want to turn teachers' energies

toward the dead end of lobbying and pressuring the bought-and-paid-for Democratic and Republican lawmakers.

These are the very big-business parties that have carried out deep cuts to school funding for decades. Between 2008 and 2018, under Republican Governor Mary 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. Twenty percent of the state's schools have been forced to adopt a four-day schedule.

It is critical that teachers review and consider the vital political and strategic issues raised by the experiences of the past two months.

It is first of all necessary to clearly understand the role and function of the teachers unions, which are working not to organize a struggle, but to suppress and isolate workers' opposition wherever it emerges.

In all the struggles by teachers, the role of these organizations is the same. In West Virginia, a series of one-day wildcat strikes forced the unions to call a limited walkout in late February and then extend it. The unions then suddenly announced that they had reached a deal with the state's billionaire governor and ordered teachers back to work on March 1. Rank-and-file teachers defied their efforts at blackmail, however, and voted to continue their fight.

The fatal weakness of that struggle, however, was that rank-and-file teachers did not build up the necessary organizations, free from the unions' control, to take the struggle forward and mobilize the broadest support in the working class. This enabled the unions to reassert their control and impose essentially the same deal the teachers

first rejected.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers and school employees in Oklahoma to form rank-and-file committees in every school and community, electing the most trusted, reliable and self-sacrificing workers. These committees should take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the strikebreakers and corporate stooges in the unions.

The struggle in Oklahoma has been driven by rank-and-file teachers who have already begun to organize independently of the union through Facebook. This initiative must be formalized and concretized into organizations that will coordinate the struggle, including via social media, and reach out to organize unified action with teachers in Kentucky, Arizona, and across the country.

Workers in every industry must be mobilized to support the movement among teachers. Instead of one-day strikes or limited protests, preparation should be made for an unlimited, nationwide general strike that will combine the fight for a vast expansion of funding for public education with the demand for the eradication of poverty, hunger, homelessness and other social ills afflicting tens of millions of working-class children.

A particular appeal should be made to student youth. The protests over school violence last weekend expressed a deep anger among young people, and many demanded increased funding for schools and other social programs. While the Democrats and media are seeking to prevent the struggles of youth from connecting to those of the working class, by limiting opposition to calls for gun control and electing Democrats, millions of young people are determined to fight for a future free from poverty, inequality and war.

Teachers are engaged in a political fight against both the Democrats and Republicans. The unions promote the lie that the Democrats are friends of teachers. The eight years of the Obama administration, however, saw the destruction of the jobs of hundreds of thousands of teachers and educators, the closure of thousands of public schools and a sharp expansion of for-profit charter businesses. In New Jersey, the Democratic-controlled board of education obtained an injunction to threaten striking teachers in Jersey City with fines and possible jail terms.

The main opposition of the Democrats to Trump is not over savage budget cutting, corporate tax cuts or mass deportations, but over the president's alleged softness on Russia.

Teachers must formulate demands not based on what

the ruling class and its political representatives say they can afford, but what teachers and the entire working class need. This includes the right to a good-paying and secure job, health care and a pension. Trillions of dollars must be invested to rebuild the country's social infrastructure, repair and build new schools, and hire millions of trained teachers, specialists, school aides and other support staff. Vast resources also must be poured into programs to eradicate poverty and address the opioid epidemic.

The corporate-controlled politicians will all say there is no money. This only shows what class interests they represent. Three billionaires in the US have more wealth than the bottom half of the population, 150 million people. The Democrats and Republicans just passed a federal budget that squanders \$700 billion on the military to continue imperialist wars.

The struggle by teachers in the US is part of a growing international battle. As teachers were striking in West Virginia and receiving messages of international solidarity from teachers in Ghana and Australia, tens of thousands of their counterparts were walking out in Argentina. Since then there have been a series of teacher and public employee strikes in the UK, Jamaica, Niger, Kenya, France, Holland, Slovenia, Brazil, India, Sri Lanka and many other countries.

Workers in every country face the same problems and the same enemies—the globally organized banks and giant corporations that want to loot society's resources and reduce the working class to the status of ignorant slaves.

A stand by teachers will win enormous support and become a pole of attraction for billions of workers everywhere who want to fight against inequality, against capitalism, and for society based on human needs, not private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to unite every battle—against budget cutting, the privatization of public services, police violence, the attack on democratic rights and the threat of war—into a single, unified struggle of the working class to fight for political power and socialism.



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