

Oklahoma teachers strike as workers' upsurge spreads in US

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2 April 2018

The World Socialist Web Site will be posting live, on-the-spot reports from Oklahoma today on its Facebook page. Follow our coverage on social media at fb.com/wsws.org.

Tens of thousands of teachers are poised to strike in the state of Oklahoma today, the latest in a series of rank-and-file rebellions by US teachers. More than 30,000 teachers and their supporters are expected to converge on the Oklahoma state Capitol building for the main demonstration.

The courageous stand by Oklahoma teachers follows the nine-day teachers strike in West Virginia, where educators' defiance of the state government and the teachers' unions galvanized workers throughout the country and internationally. This latest strike action follows a rank-and-file sickout by teachers in Kentucky and coincides with mounting demands by Arizona teachers for a statewide strike.

The corporate media, which ignored the strike in West Virginia as long as possible, has been compelled to take note of the strike in Oklahoma. Coverage has included revealing interviews with teachers who are forced to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet.

"Last night I drove Lyft and Uber for six, seven hours," high school algebra teacher Jonathan Moy told CNN. "When you have to do that to help supplement your income, it's tough when you don't get home when your kids go to bed." The *Washington Post* profiled Virginia Ayers, a 6th grade educator in Tulsa, who teaches a class of 36 students and donates plasma twice a week to help pay off a car repair loan.

By some measures, Oklahoma teachers are the lowest-paid in the country out of the fifty states plus the District of Columbia. The state has led the country in cuts to public education for four consecutive years, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

At the same time, the state doles out hundreds of millions of dollars in tax incentives to the oil and gas industry every year. The situation is so dire that 20 percent of the state's school boards have cut back to a four-day-a-week class schedule.

The mainstream media has portrayed the growing strike wave among teachers as a "red state rebellion" against Republican-led austerity measures. However, the situation in Oklahoma, West Virginia and elsewhere is by no means unique to Southern states with Republican governors and Republican majorities in the state legislature. Last month, teachers in Jersey City, New Jersey went on strike, and teachers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania voted for strike action. In 2015, teachers in Detroit staged sickouts in opposition to atrocious conditions in their schools.

The disastrous situation facing public schools and educators is the result of a national and international ruling-class policy of slashing social spending to pay for surging military budgets and bolster the profits of the banks and corporations. Under the Obama administration, which pumped trillions of dollars into the financial markets after the 2008 financial crisis, federal funding for school districts was slashed by 11 percent and special education was cut by nine percent.

As with the teachers strike last month in West Virginia, the impulse has come not from the trade union bureaucracy, but from rank-and-file teachers, who organized mainly outside and independently of the union by means of social media.

After being forced by pressure from the teachers to call for a statewide strike on April 2—as a means of letting off steam and heading off any broader action—the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) made one last attempt to prevent a walkout, helping to broker a bill in the state legislature that includes

inadequate funding increases paid for largely by regressive sales taxes. The bill fails to restore the billions in cuts by successive Republican and Democratic state governments over the past decade.

Attempts by OEA President Alicia Priest and Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin to spin the bill as the “largest teacher pay raise in state history” were met with widespread hostility among teachers. “Here’s the thing: you don’t get to brag about how big a raise is when you haven’t given one in 20+ years (sic),” one commenter wrote on Fallin’s Twitter page. “‘This is the biggest meal you’ve ever had!’ she said to the starving child, who still isn’t getting near enough nutrition. ‘I hope you’ll thank me and go back to school.’”

The OEA is seeking to limit the strike as much as possible. Fallin and Priest both expressed hopes last week that today’s demonstration at the Capitol would be a one-day rally “thanking” the state legislature for the funding increase, although Priest later backtracked in a livestreamed speech on Thursday.

In contrast, the overwhelming sentiment among teachers is for an all-out struggle to secure serious increases. The Oklahoma Teacher United Facebook page, one of the largest social media accounts set up by teachers to organize resistance, has called for an indefinite, statewide sick-out after Monday’s demonstration, following the example of teachers in Kentucky, who shut down schools in 29 counties on Friday. The page reports that this post has been viewed more than 25,000 times.

“We marched on the capitol three years ago with tens of thousands of people and NOTHING happened... This time, we don’t wait for the union or the superintendents to lead. TEACHERS LEAD!!!! There are 42,000 teachers standing in protest this year and there is a WHOLE STATE of people behind us yelling WALK WALK WALK WALK!!!! Don’t let unions, or superintendents, or even legislators take away your confidence,” the page declared.

The strike by Oklahoma teachers is only the latest in a growing rebellion by teachers throughout the country. Thousands of teachers in Kentucky are expected to turn out at a demonstration today at the state Capitol in Frankfort, following Friday’s sickout. While many school districts will be closed as scheduled today due to the spring break holiday, other school districts have

already canceled classes in anticipation of continuing actions by teachers.

The Kentucky sickout followed the provocative passage by the state legislature of a bill slashing pensions. The measure was enacted without public discussion by inserting language on pensions in an unrelated sewage-spending bill. The Kentucky Education Association, however, has publicly distanced itself from the actions of teachers as the work of “individuals,” and sought to divert teachers’ anger along the dead-end channel of campaigning for Democratic candidates in the November election.

In Arizona, where pressure is also growing for a statewide walkout, Governor Doug Ducey scoffed at teacher demands for a 20 percent pay raise on Thursday, declaring that they would not get it “now or in the foreseeable future.” Ducey instead reiterated his proposal for an insulting 1 percent pay increase, less than half of the annual 2.2 percent rate of inflation.

Ducey has also refused to “[back] away from his pledge not only to never increase taxes, but also in refusing to reverse any of the hundreds of millions of dollars in corporate tax cuts that have kicked in since taking office,” the *Arizona Capitol Times* reported. The newspaper noted that “each \$100 million that was lost would translate to a 3 percent pay hike for teachers.” Ducey has also reiterated his support for a \$15 million tax cut this year.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has posted a statement (“Build rank-and-file committees to unite with teachers in Arizona and Kentucky! Mobilize the working class behind striking Oklahoma educators!”) advancing a strategy to mobilize the broadest possible support in the working class to defend public education and the wages and conditions of educators and school employees.



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