

Teachers' rebellion spreads as tens of thousands strike in Oklahoma and Kentucky

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The teachers' revolt in the United States entered a new stage on Monday as tens of thousands of teachers, students and working-class supporters took part in massive protests in Oklahoma and Kentucky. The growing wave of unrest among educators requires not only the attention and support of all workers, but their active participation.

The strike by 30,000 teachers in Oklahoma follows their rejection of a one-time pay increase of \$6,000 and a miserly increase in school funding, financed largely through regressive taxes, passed by the state legislature on Thursday. The thousands of teachers protesting in Kentucky denounced the passage of a bill last week slashing pensions.

The walkout in Oklahoma, which the unions hoped to limit to a one-day strike, will continue today. School districts throughout the state have announced that they will remain closed, with many reporting that the closures will continue at least through Wednesday. While the unions are doing everything they can to get teachers back to work, there is a powerful sentiment for the extension and expansion of the strike.

The developments in Oklahoma and Kentucky are the latest expression of a resurgence of class struggle in the United States and around the world. They follow by less than a month the nine-day strike by teachers in West Virginia and the one-day strike by teachers in Jersey City, New Jersey. On March 28, thousands of teachers rallied in Phoenix, Arizona to demand a 20 percent pay increase and more funding for public schools.

The teachers' strikes also follow the demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of student youth last weekend.

Beyond the borders of the United States, there have been strikes and protests in recent weeks by educators in Greece, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, the UK, Canada, Kenya and many other countries. Train drivers in France began a series of walkouts against right-wing labor reforms yesterday, following strikes by metalworkers in Germany and Turkey and uprisings in Iran, Tunisia and Morocco earlier this year.

The growth of class conflict is blowing apart the entire framework of official bourgeois politics and its institutions.

It shatters the pretenses of right-wing, middle-class identity politics and the claim, relentlessly promoted by the *New York Times* and other media outlets, that the essential divisions within the United States revolve around race and gender, not class.

The workers in Oklahoma, Kentucky, West Virginia and Arizona are all in so-called "red states," that is, those sections of the country that former Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton recently castigated as "backward-looking" because they voted for Trump in the 2016 election. The middle-class organizations that orbit the Democratic Party have repeatedly declared that the workers in these states, the majority of whom are white, are reactionary and racist.

The demands advanced by teachers in these states are not defined or limited by geography, race or occupation. It is not surprising that teachers are at the forefront of the developing class battles, since education funding has been devastated by decades of budget cuts. Teachers, moreover, confront every day the consequences of the social crisis in America, from poverty and unemployment to drug addiction and homelessness.

The assault on teachers and public education is one aspect of a social counterrevolution that has targeted every section of the working class. While a tiny layer of corporate oligarchs has amassed unimaginable levels of wealth, the majority of the population faces low wages, soaring health care costs and the destruction of the social infrastructure.

When teachers in Oklahoma speak of having to take on multiple jobs, being unable to pay off thousands of dollars in student loans, and seeing whatever meager pay increases they receive eaten up by rising health care co-pays and deductibles, they give voice to the universal experience of all workers.

The developing class struggle has brought workers into direct conflict with the anti-working class, corporatist organizations—the trade unions—that for decades have worked to suppress opposition to job and wage cuts and social inequality. As in West Virginia, the strikes in

Oklahoma and Kentucky are being organized by rank-and-file workers in opposition to the unions and the wealthy, upper-middle-class executives who control them.

In the aftermath of the West Virginia strike, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten (annual income \$500,000) repeated the recent statement of union lawyers before the Supreme Court in the case of *Janus vs. AFSCME* that “union security is the tradeoff for no strikes.” The weakening of the unions, she warned the ruling class, would “lead to more activism and political action.” Here one has the reality—that the unions exist not to organize the struggle of workers but to suppress it—coming from the horse’s mouth.

The bourgeois media was filled Monday with worried commentary about the implications of workers breaking free of the stranglehold of the unions. The *New York Times* commented that the strikes were “organized by ordinary teachers on Facebook” and had caught the “labor unions flat-footed.” Bloomberg wrote that the strikes “are spreading fast across the country, with no clear endgame in sight,” and that the unions are in a “tough spot” because teachers “have proven they’re not only willing to go ‘wildcat,’ but that they may keep doing so even if the union cuts a deal.”

The concern of the ruling class is that the institutions on which they have relied for decades have lost all credibility. Their fears are compounded by the widespread use of the Internet and social media, which has enabled workers to organize and mobilize independently and in defiance of the union bureaucracy.

The struggles of workers are bringing them into direct conflict with the Democratic and Republican parties and the entire state apparatus. As the Trump administration wages an all-out assault on the working class, the Democrats, in alliance with the intelligence agencies, center their criticisms of Trump on demands that he carry out a more aggressive war policy in the Middle East and against Russia.

The claim that Russia is “sowing divisions” in the United States is being used to justify a regime of Internet censorship aimed at shutting down precisely those mechanisms the workers are employing to organize and coordinate opposition to big business and the government.

While the ruling class has been fighting out its internal conflict over foreign policy, an entirely different movement has been building up from below and has now erupted to the surface of American political life. The alarm of the ruling class over the consequences was registered Monday in the sell-off on Wall Street, propelled by fears of inflation—that is, rising wages.

The many different forms of social protest are acquiring an ever more distinct working-class identity and anticapitalist orientation. The objective logic of these struggles is in the

direction of a general strike, unifying opposition to social inequality, cuts in wages, health care and pensions, police violence, and the myriad forms of social crisis in the United States and internationally.

To carry out this fight, workers require new organizations, independent of the pro-capitalist and corporatist syndicates that call themselves unions. It is necessary to form rank-and-file committees not only among teachers, but among all sections of the working class: autoworkers laboring under contracts rammed through by union officials on the company take; Amazon and other service workers working for poverty-level wages; telecommunications workers confronting rising health care costs; student youth facing a future of debt, unemployment and war. All workers have the same interests and the same class enemies.

The struggle cannot be limited to the United States. As the Socialist Equality Party anticipated, the development of the class struggle is emerging as an international movement, undermining the poisonous influence of nationalism and inspiring a deeply felt sense of international class solidarity. Workers all over the world are inspired by the events in Oklahoma and Kentucky, as they were by the strike in West Virginia.

The establishment of independent organizations of working-class struggle must be connected to the development of a socialist political leadership in the working class. The objective logic of the battles into which workers are entering must be made conscious. In opposition to the ruling class agenda of war, reaction and dictatorship, the working class must advance its own solution to the crisis confronting mankind: a massive redistribution of wealth, the expropriation of the major corporations and banks, and the socialist reorganization of economic life.



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