“This needs to go to all 50 states”

Oklahoma teachers call for broadening of strike

Our reporters
3 April 2018

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking teachers, teachers’ assistants and other public employees who attended yesterday’s demonstration of more than 15,000 people in Oklahoma City to demand wage raises and increases to school funding.

The strike was driven by rank-and-file teachers, largely through social media. While the two unions covering Oklahoma teachers, the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), were forced to officially support the rally, many workers expressed deep skepticism in the unions. In contrast, there was widespread support for expanding the strike and linking up with teachers across the country, including in Kentucky and Arizona.

Bonnie has been teaching early childhood education for more than 30 years. Like many other teachers, she followed the West Virginia teachers’ strike on Facebook when the teachers rebelled against the unions’ efforts to shut down the strike.

“In West Virginia they stayed out when the union said to go back,” she noted. The West Virginia teachers were “the catalyst of what we’re doing here, and we’re the catalyst for what is happening in Arizona and Kentucky. And we’re going to see this across the nation. Finally, education is going to be brought to the forefront of this country. It is not just a state thing. We need to rise up as a nation of teachers.”

As in West Virginia, Bonnie noted, “our legislators think that we’re going away. I think the union does too! The OEA and the AFT are not encouraging us to stay out.”

A WSWS reporter noted that the OEA had initially labeled as “historic” last week’s agreement, which provides an insulting $6,000 pay increase—approximately half what teachers demanded—and wholly inadequate school funding increases. Bonnie replied: “It shouldn’t be ‘historic!’” She added that “the AFT said to go out on Monday and say ‘Thank you!’ There is revenue in this state that they can use to fund education.”

Val is a physical education teacher in Oklahoma City. “They spend $205 million for a basketball player, and I can’t get a budget to buy a basketball,” she said. “Something’s not right in our society.”

Val explained that the strike in West Virginia had “kickstarted this.” Now Kentucky teachers are on strike “because the legislature put in a sewerage bill to lower their retirement benefits. A sewer bill! Is that all we’re worth?”

“They’re doing this so that public schools fail so private schools can come make a profit and destroy public education,” she added. “That’s where it’s headed if we don’t stand up,” Val explained. “It needs to go to all 50 states.”

Noting that the union had worked to sell out the strike by West Virginia teachers, Val said, “I don’t believe in what the union did. My father was a union man but that was back when the unions worked for the people. I believe in unions because I think we need something to fight for us. But the unions need to remember they fight for us and not for the legislature.”

Tracy is a longtime teacher and veteran of the last teachers’ strike in Oklahoma in 1990. “It’s about time that teachers in Oklahoma and the rest of the country are standing up,” she said. “For too long we’ve been sheep and didn’t want to upset the apple cart. We didn’t want to walk out of the classrooms and hurt the kids. But [the legislature] has been cutting year after year—and they’re hurting the kids. At this point you just can’t cut me anymore.”

The result of these cuts, Tracy explained, was that she

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now purchases basic necessities for her children, including their field trips and “more lunches for the kids than my own. I have taken clothes and shoes out of my closet, day after day, year after year.”

Tracy rejected the perspective advocated by the unions, that teachers must seek to convince the bought-and-paid for Democratic and Republican legislators that they should fund public education. “It’s not that the legislators don’t know what we go through,” she said. “A lot of them went to public schools and know what we do. It’s just that they don’t care. They don’t have to struggle to keep their lights on. They don’t have paychecks cleaned out by medical costs.”

She explained how teachers had used social media to organize the strike outside and independently of the unions. “This movement was started by rank-and-file teachers in the trenches, not by the union officials. We use social media because the media only tells us what they want us to know.

“Teachers are an educated community and we want substance. The money is there and we know it. But for the politicians it is all a shell game, a bait-and-switch operation. I’m tired of my kids not getting what they deserve and need.”

Kirsten is a second-year teacher. She came to the rally with her mother, Terry, who taught for 35 years before retiring, but recently returned to work as an assistant teacher because, as she said, “you can’t live on a teacher’s retirement.”

Kirsten said the pay raise offer for teachers would not resolve the ongoing issue of school underfunding. “What has been done so far is not a solution. The support staff need funding. The children need funding. Thank you for the pay raise? No.”

The government did not want to fund education “because of oil, and because they’re building more jails,” she said. “If they were investing in education they wouldn’t have to build more jails. It would solve a lot of the issues. But that’s just the first step. We need to start allocating money where it belongs. In education, also in food banks.”

She explained that many of her children have their only meal of the day while at school. “I don’t know where some of them will be eating when they’re not at school and it scares me,” she said. “I’m not just a teacher for them, I’m mom, I’m dad, I’m nurse. I wear so many hats and I’m not expendable.”

Laura, Kelly and Kate work at Dear Creek Middle School, located in Edmond, a suburb of Oklahoma City.

Kelly carried a sign saying, “No worries, I like living in poverty.” She said that in order to survive on her $250 weekly wage as a teacher’s assistant, “you have to be very organized with your money. I eat on $50 a week. I live in low-income housing. I’m supporting myself and make $1,000 a month, and that includes my coaching stipend.”

Kate is a teacher’s assistant. She noted that during the teachers’ strike in West Virginia, the union had told teachers to “go back to school!” She commented, “The union leaders aren’t in there teaching the classes. They’re not there for the kids. They’re there for themselves, to draw a paycheck for themselves, and not for the teachers or the kids.”

“I’m not with a union,” she said. “I’m out here for myself and our teachers. We deserve something. It’s not for the rich. My parents were teachers and I know how the struggle is. Both of them had to have a job to get us through college, and they had summer jobs to get us there.”

Terri is a public employee and came to the rally to support her three sisters, all of whom are public school teachers. She was opposed to the fact that the inadequate pay raise rejected by teachers is itself to be funded through regressive taxes that will hit the working class. This reactionary measure was proposed and supported by the OEA.

“Everything that I understand about the taxes that they intend to use to fund the raises, they’re not going to offend anybody but the working class. They’re putting more on cigarettes. They’re putting more on gas. They’re not taxing more on gas by the barrel, where the companies would pay for it! They’re taxing us more at the pump, when we fill up our cars."

A WSWS reporter noted that union officials were advocating that teachers go and speak to legislators. “The unfortunate part is that these people [the legislators] have no intention of helping. They will make you believe they finally understand, that they are going to help you. But they’ll keep doing the same thing. We sometimes think the politicians are here to help us, but they’re really here for their own selfish ambitions.”

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