

Oklahoma teachers converging on capitol for third day of strike

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Thousands of Oklahoma teachers, students and their supporters are expected to converge on the state capitol today, the third day of a walkout by nearly 40,000 educators in the southwestern US state. Teachers are demanding pay raises and the restoration of more than a decade of bipartisan school funding cuts, which have left the state near the bottom in the US for both teacher pay and per-pupil funding.

To the chagrin of state legislators and the teacher unions, which first opposed the strike and then hoped to limit it to one day, thousands of teachers showed up at the state capitol in Oklahoma City yesterday. By mid-morning, capitol officials said the building had reached capacity and prevented additional protesters from entering.

Outside the building there was an almost festive atmosphere, with teachers coming in on busses from throughout the state. Many carried signs denouncing Republican Governor Mary Fallin and demanding sufficient funding to provide the state's 700,000 school children with a quality education.

By early Tuesday evening, most of the state's districts, including Oklahoma City and Tulsa, announced that schools would be closed Wednesday, with many saying they would determine on a day-by-day basis if enough teachers showed up to resume school. Tulsa teachers are beginning a 110-mile march to the state capitol today.

The strike was initiated by rank-and-file teachers, who used social media to communicate and launch a series of coordinated sickouts and protests to build up support for a statewide strike. For months, the unions—the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and the Oklahoma City American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—opposed a walkout and then tried to delay it. This was overruled by rank-and-file teachers inspired by the nine-day strike of West Virginia teachers and the growing militancy of educators in Kentucky, Arizona, Colorado, New Jersey and other states.

In a last gasp effort to prevent a strike, the OEA and the AFT praised as “historic” an insulting bipartisan pay raise and spending bill, which would fund an average \$6,000 raise chiefly through a series of regressive taxes on cigarettes, gas

and diesel fuel, and potentially other cuts to state services.

Determined to reverse years of union acquiescence to funding cuts that have left teachers' pay and per pupil educational spending near the bottom in the US, rank-and-file teachers overwhelmingly rejected the sham offer and walked out Monday.

Jennifer, a teacher at Orvis Risner Elementary School in the Oklahoma City suburb of Edmond, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I have 25 or 26 kids in my classroom, and I have to share science textbooks between classes. In my class I only have 13 textbooks. Because we don't have funding for enough science kits, we have to share among teachers. Why can't the students have their own textbooks?”

Referring to the impact of the social crisis in many public schools, her co-teacher, Mary, added, “The students aren't thinking about math when they're thinking about what they're going to eat that night or where they'll sleep.”

Mary and another Risner Elementary School teacher, Arlisa, said they thought the unions expected teachers to return to work after the first day of the strike on Monday. The teachers “should say thank you,” Arlisa said, a reference to OEA President Alicia Priest's repeated statements thanking legislators for the miserable funding bill passed last week.

“We have power in numbers,” Mary said. “It seems like it's a trickle-down effect from West Virginia. Everyone's saying, ‘Look, they can do it; we can do it.’ So maybe it will start just taking off, with everyone saying, ‘We're not going to take it anymore.’ Even the state workers yesterday were fighting for their rights,” she added. “It's like wildfire.”

Their co-worker Jennifer noted, “We had an Uber driver picking us up yesterday. She was also a state worker, and she said this is my last pickup, and then I'm joining you at the state capitol.”

Explaining how rank-and-file workers had used Facebook and other social media to organize the strike, Jennifer said, “That's how we've got our voices heard. It started with a small group, ‘The Time is Now,’ and overnight the growth

was phenomenal. You see that we're all saying the same things, and we're all wanting the same things for our kids."

Penny, a teacher from the Santa Fe South Schools told the WSWs, "Because of social media and technology, there's so much that we can do to pass the word around, to get assistance, to organize and bond together. We're using the internet and social media to make a change and make a difference."

Hostile to a broader mobilization of teachers throughout the country, the unions have sought to boost illusions that maneuvers with bought-and-paid for politicians will address the school funding crisis.

Responding to the strike, Governor Fallin, who has handed out massive tax cuts to the state's oil and gas industry, said in statement, "Just like Oklahoma families, we are only able to do what our budget allows... We must be responsible not to neglect other areas of need in the state such as corrections and health and human services as we continue to consider additional education funding measures."

One Republican legislator, Kevin McDugle of Broken Arrow, in a Facebook livestream he later deleted, denounced the teachers for protesting inside the capitol and claimed legislative assistants had been sent home because of "death threats." The threats, he claimed, were "not necessarily" from Oklahoma teachers but could have come from outside protesters from "Chicago and California." McDugle said, "All year long, we supported you and now you're going to come and act like this, after you got a raise. Go right ahead. Be pissed at me if you want to."

While Republicans steadfastly opposed any further funding measures, the state Democrats who supported the bogus funding bill last week postured as champions of the teachers, with backing of the unions. On Tuesday, Democrats brought a bill to the floor of the House to repeal a capital gains tax reduction, which they knew would be blocked by the Republican-controlled House, and then marched out of the chambers with their fists up in the air.

This was nothing but a cynical charade. The capital gains tax cut, which benefits the state's hundreds of millionaires and robs an average of \$100 million each year in revenue, was authored by Democratic state senators, backed by Governor Fallin's Democratic predecessor, Brad Henry, and passed by Democratic-controlled House in 2004. At the time Henry said the capital gains tax and permanently reducing the top income tax rate for the rich would "encourage new investment and boost our economy."

The OEA and the AFT are working desperately with state Democrats and Republicans to come up with some type of gesture to get teachers back to the classrooms. The unions have said they would call off the strike if legislators agreed to fill a \$50 million budget gap created by the last-minute

repeal of the hotel/motel tax included in the funding bill and pass a bill that would increase revenue by allowing "ball and dice" gambling and find "additional" resources to fund schools.

None of these measures—based on further regressive taxes on the working class and the poor, just like past lottery and gambling schemes—would seriously address the 11 years of consecutive school funding cuts implemented by Democrats and Republicans alike.

The strike is at critical juncture. The unions want to wear down teachers with fruitless lobbying campaigns, while awaiting a shift by school superintendents and local school boards to move against the strikers and threaten teachers with punitive measures.

The only way to prevent this sabotage is for teachers to elect rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the anti-working class unions, to launch a campaign to mobilize the broadest support throughout the working class to back the teachers. These committees should also reach out to teachers in Arizona, Kentucky, New Mexico, Colorado and throughout the US to organize a national strike to defend public education.

Yesterday, the *Tampa Bay Times* reported that teachers in Florida are setting up Facebook pages to press for a statewide strike. In response, the Florida Education Association posted a statement on its website saying that a strike was illegal and "not appropriate and comes with harsh consequences."

On Monday, an AP world history teacher from the Miami-Dade public school system launched a Facebook group, Florida Educators United, with the message: "As underpaid teachers from West Virginia, to Oklahoma, to Kentucky, and Arizona use social media to organize both from within, and independently of, established unions, this group seeks to unite Florida educators and their supporters to raise awareness and encourage activism amongst public school teachers, parents, and students from across the Sunshine state."

Nadia Zananiri, the organizer of the page, said she would rather the unions take action, "but they aren't. ... We have lost faith in our unions to accomplish anything."



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