“We need to take inspiration from their courage”

Autoworkers speak in support of teachers struggle

Our reporters
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Autoworkers across the United States are taking inspiration and courage from the ongoing struggles by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky and other states.

As teachers in Oklahoma, who are engaged in their first statewide walkout since 1990, enter their fifth day of struggle, workers throughout the country feel moved by their willingness to fight and their defiance of attempts to wind up the strike by the official teacher unions.

Autoworkers, who have been saddled with decades of concessions imposed through the collaboration of the United Auto Workers and management, readily identify with the teachers. As a result of the 2015 sellout deal imposed by the UAW over fierce opposition from rank-and-file workers, the auto companies are hiring more and more temporary part-time workers who earn substandard pay and benefits and who have few rights.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* spoke to autoworkers in greater Detroit and Chicago to learn their views on the unfolding teacher struggles. Workers contacted by the WSWS backed the fight by the teachers and offered their support and encouragement.

Gerald, a young tier-two worker at the Fiat Chrysler Warren Stamping plant in suburban Detroit, addressed the teachers: “Hold your ground. Stay firm and diligent. We have to support the fight to bring economic equality to teachers. We have to break down the divisions.”

He explained why he was extending his support: “It shows you there is a deep economic divide in the US, extreme rich to extreme poor. Teachers deserve everything they get. Some of them make less than we do as autoworkers, even though they have to earn college degrees.

“What they have been offered is an insult. They deserve much more because they are so important. Most teachers do it for the love of children, but at the end of the day they still have families to support. It is sad because teachers are the ones that educate the doctors and lawyers, yet they get paid much less.

“The same politicians who vote for teacher pay cuts are also voting themselves raises. They work maybe nine months of a year, and part-time at that, but they receive full time pay and leave multi-millionaires. Yet many people with so called middle class incomes don’t make enough to buy good health insurance. But the politicians say, privatize Medicare, Medicaid and health insurance.

“Democrats and Republicans are basically no different. In the end they are all for the millionaires.”

When the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* explained the necessity of teachers and workers breaking with the unions and forming rank-and-file workplace committees and fight to unite workers internationally, Gerald said, “We have to unite, they are trying to manipulate and coerce us, like this is all for the greater good.”

Asked if he thought that the unfolding struggles could culminate in a general strike, he said, “A general strike would be unprecedented. It would greatly impact the stock markets--autoworkers, teachers, firefighters coming together. It would come down to a contest, but I think we (the workers) would win.

Michelle, a veteran Fiat Chrysler worker from Detroit, said of the teachers strikes, “I think it is phenomenal. The teachers are walking out and the students are backing them. They need all the support and encouragement they can get. Together we stand,

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divided we fall.

"I am definitely feeling encouragement from this. They are coming together as a united front to make a statement--support public education for children. I think it is wonderful, they are saying that we will take whatever course we have to take to make sure millennials get an education."

She compared the situation facing teachers in Oklahoma to that facing Detroit teachers, who carried out a sickout over abysmal conditions in the schools combined with attempts by the district to dock their pay in 2016.

"Some of the students are not getting the education they need because of overcrowded classrooms, both in Detroit and in Oklahoma. To get things done you have to come together as a whole."

Asked who should pay for improvements to public education, she added, "I think there is money there. They should tax the billionaires like Dan Gilbert (founder of Quicken Loans in Detroit) to help fund the schools."

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* also spoke to several workers at Ford who spoke in support of the teachers.

"You can tell a lot from a country based on how much they spend on education," said a worker from Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant. "What is happening now in states like West Virginia, Kentucky and Oklahoma pretty much tells you how absolutely ridiculous it is. Our teachers must suffer with wages that let them survive but not live. This can only have one outcome, and that is a negative effect on the students.

"We must support our teachers. We must help them obtain better wages and more resources for their classrooms. This will only benefit our kids, our future and our country in the long run."

He concluded, "Teachers, Fight! Fight long and fight fiercely, for you hold our future in your classrooms. You certainly deserve better!"

DJ, a worker at the Ford Dearborn Assembly Plant outside of Detroit also spoke to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*.

"Bless these teachers. They have got to stand up. They need to do it here also in Detroit. Our educational system is only structured to teach students how to work in a factory. They have been robbing and pillaging the village as much as they can.

"We need to take inspiration from their courage," he continued. Remarking on the rebellion by teachers against their own unions, he added, "Right there with the teachers, the majority is ruling. The rank-and-file is coming together."

"The teachers are superheroes at this point for their willingness to stand up and be willing to sacrifice for their cause," he continued.

Darren, a worker at heavy equipment maker Caterpillar in Illinois, gave his advice to the teachers in Oklahoma and elsewhere: "I would encourage you to stand strong. The fact that there is such unity among you across the state is a credit to your profession and your determination.

"I would further encourage you, in the face of your union's attempts to pull the plug on this strike, to pull the plug on the union instead. It doesn't represent you. That's not its purpose. It plays the 'good cop' in a shake down. It's all just a racket.

"Organize local committees to negotiate at a district level and coordinate between committees regarding mutual action and demands. I truly believe that this is the only viable option. As a UAW member I can say unequivocally there is no help to be had from the unions. I wish you success. You are an inspiration to workers across professions worldwide."

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