

Teachers' rebellion continues in Oklahoma and across the US

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Thousands of Oklahoma teachers and their supporters are expected to fill the state capitol in Oklahoma City today, as the strike by nearly 40,000 teachers in the southwestern US state reaches its fifth day.

Teachers are demanding a \$10,000 pay raise and a sharp increase in school funding in the state. Under both Democrats and Republicans, Oklahoma has slashed 28 percent of its school budget over the last decade and ranks near the bottom nationally in teacher pay and per-pupil spending.

Despite efforts by the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and Oklahoma City-American Federation of Teachers (OKC-AFT) to prevent the walkout and then sabotage it by boosting illusions in state Democrats, a union official was forced to say the strike would continue next week. Teachers in Tulsa are marching to the state capitol on a 110-mile trek, which is building up support along the route.

The walkout, which was initiated by rank-and-file educators in defiance of the unions and the state's anti-strike laws, is part of a powerful movement of teachers spreading throughout the US and internationally.

On Monday, Kentucky teachers, many of whom had carried out sickouts, marched on the state capital of Frankfort to defend their pensions, and protests continued later in the week in the eastern city of Pikeville.

More than 1,000 educators and supporters converged on the Arizona State Office Building in downtown Tucson, Arizona Wednesday afternoon, after a series of "walk-in" rallies at local schools.

Hundreds of students and teachers walked out Wednesday at Anacostia High School in Washington, D.C. to protest squalid conditions, including no running water, broken toilets and a flooded cafeteria. At one point, according to the *Washington Post*, "students and teachers linked arms at the front of the school and chanted, 'Anacostia Matters,' 'Our children matter' and 'Our teachers matter.'" Teachers, the *Post* noted, said, "they readily work long hours each day to help their students," and already face an "evaluation

system that ties teachers' salaries to their performance. Showing up to school with broken plumbing and little warning felt like another injustice."

The same day, 350 faculty members and graduate students—whose payment to teach courses has not increased in a decade—held a one-day strike at Loyola University in Chicago. Lecturers at the University of Michigan also voted this week to strike Monday. "We've got lecturers with children on public assistance, lecturers working two or three jobs, lecturers who are leaving the university because they can't afford to live on their miserable salaries," a lecturer told the *Detroit News*.

The rebellion has caused the *New York Times* to worriedly comment about a "wildfire" of strikes by teachers who are using social media to "organize and act outside the usual parameters of traditional unionism."

This movement is part of a resurgence of the class struggle internationally. On Thursday, tens of thousands of teachers in Buenos Aires, Argentina held a 24-hour strike to demand a 24 percent wage increase as part of planned general strike by transit and other public employees to oppose the austerity and privatization agenda of the President Mauricio Macri. This is the latest in a rising wave of strikes and protests by public school teachers and university workers throughout Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia.

In state after state, and country after country, educators are battling the results of a decade of austerity since the 2008 financial crash, which has deeply eroded their wages and living standards and left their classrooms overcrowded and lacking the most basic supplies.

Throughout the eight years of the Obama administration, the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association and other public and private sector unions reduced the number of major strikes to the lowest level since the end of World War II. During this time, the Democratic president oversaw the elimination of 300,000 school employees, encouraged school districts to scapegoat teachers for educational problems caused by budget cutting and poverty, and sharply increased for-profit charter schools.

On the state and local level, the teachers unions collaborated with Democrats who imposed Obama's corporate "school reform" agenda in city after city, blocking strikes or selling them out if they broke out, as in Chicago in 2012 and most recently in Jersey City, New Jersey. The unions backed Democratic candidates pushing for regressive sales and home ownership taxes, which hit working class families the hardest, including lottery schemes that are no more than another tax on the poor.

President Trump and his billionaire education secretary Betsy DeVos are accelerating the assault on public education. The administration seeks to increase funding for school vouchers and charter schools to siphon off resources from already cash-strapped public schools.

There is an enormous and growing sentiment among teachers for a unified struggle. One long-time Oklahoma science teacher protesting at the capitol told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We need a national teachers' strike. I've been telling people there is a national campaign to privatize and destroy public education."

A veteran teacher in Phoenix, Arizona added, "The Oklahoma teachers have taken an incredibly courageous stand that we should all aspire to. This is a class struggle. The politicians pushing charter schools and privatization want to boost their own investments and kill public education."

The main role of the unions is to prevent a unified fight against the bipartisan assault on public education. In Florida, Iowa and other states, teachers, disgusted by years of union collusion with the authorities, are setting up Facebook pages to call for collective action with teachers in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona and other states. This has prompted union officials to warn teachers that strikes are illegal and will lead to huge fines and even imprisonment.

The Florida Education Association warned, "Walking off the job or reporting to work late is not an appropriate action and it comes with harsh consequences. It is important for all FEA members to follow the law."

A strike is "not an option at this time," said Tammy Wawro, president of the Iowa State Education Association. "We are bound by Iowa law, which prohibits public employees from striking."

A veteran teacher in Phoenix, Arizona told the WSWS that union officials said it was "too early" to discuss a date for a statewide strike demanded by teachers because the state legislature had not had time to consider their demand for a 20 percent raise. In fact, Governor Doug Ducey has already rejected it out of hand, saying teachers will only get one percent.

While the Oklahoma strike was initiated rank-and-file teachers through Facebook pages like "Oklahoma Teachers

United" and "Oklahoma Teachers Walkout-The Time is Now!," the OEA and the OKC-AFT have sought to hijack and smother the struggle by limiting teachers to fruitless appeals to state legislators controlled by the state's powerful oil and gas industry.

At the same time, union officials are telling teachers that the only way to win full funding for education is to elect Democrats or even run as Democrats in November.

If the Oklahoma struggle is not to be defeated, rank-and-file teachers must break completely with the unions and consciously take the leadership of the struggle into their own hands. Any illusions that these anti-working-class organizations that call themselves "unions" can be pressured to fight would be a fatal mistake.

Instead, teachers should elect rank-and-file committees to expand the strike by appealing to teachers and workers throughout the state and across the US for joint action, including preparing for a general strike.

At the same time, teachers must reject the entire political framework the unions uphold, based on the political domination of two big business parties, which defend the wealth and power of the corporate and financial elite. Both parties claim there is no money to restore more than a decade of budget cuts, let alone fund a vast improvement of public education, even as they squander trillions on corporate tax cuts, bank bailouts and endless wars for the very same energy conglomerates and giant corporations that refuse to pay a penny for public education.

The social right to high quality public education, living wages, and health and pension benefits will only be won through the political mobilization of the working class, in opposition to both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist profit system they defend.



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