

Unions seek to hijack, shut down Oklahoma teachers strike as support for expanded struggle grows

The Socialist Equality Party
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As the strike by tens of thousands of Oklahoma teachers and support staff enters its second week, workers face a critical crossroads. While teachers are determined to expand the fight in defense of public education, the unions are doing everything they can to hijack the struggle, shut it down, and impose a sellout.

The courageous stand taken by educators, following the nine-day strike in West Virginia, has won widespread support in the working class across the United States and internationally. It takes place amidst a resurgence of class struggle throughout the world.

The strike was initiated and driven by teachers, who have resisted the efforts by the unions—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA)—to end the strike without addressing teachers’ main demands.

Now, the unions hope to shut down the strike with minor additions to the rotten bipartisan deal—initially hailed by the unions as “historic”—that teachers already overwhelmingly rejected on March 29 in pushing to strike. These would provide a few tens of millions of dollars in school funding, which will be paid for through regressive taxes that will hit the working class hardest, including the legalization of “ball and dice” casino gambling.

The unions have dropped any reference to the workers’ demands for a \$10,000 pay raise for teachers, \$5,000 for school support staff, and at least \$200 million in additional funding. Instead, Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) president Alicia Priest indicated on Friday that the OEA has backtracked even from the “bottom line” it previously set to end the strike, including repeal of a capital gains tax cut.

According to the *Tulsa World*, Priest “declined to be

specific about how much additional revenue would satisfy the teachers. Priest would say only that she was advocating generally for teachers’ demands for more operational dollars.” In other words, Priest is conspiring with legislatures to reach some rotten agreement to shut down the struggle.

None of the measures being considered will do anything to address a decade of funding cuts by both parties, overseen by the unions, which have seen real annual school spending in Oklahoma cut by \$1 billion, or more than \$1,000 per student.

Nationally, the teachers unions are determined to isolate the Oklahoma teachers and prevent an expansion of the strike to other states—for which there is enormous and growing support among workers.

The Kentucky Education Association released a statement Friday repeating the lie of the media and politicians that any action by teachers will harm students. “Our students need us to show up for them in classrooms and schools,” it said. “We urge educators statewide not to allow our united efforts to be compromised by continued calls for action that deprive students, parents and communities of the educational services we provide.”

Tammy Wawro, president of the Iowa State Education Association, said there would be “harsh” penalties if Iowa teachers were to strike. A statement by the Florida Education Association declared, “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.”

If teachers do not take the strike out of the hands of the strikebreaking corporate stooges in the unions, it

will inevitably be betrayed. This is the lesson of the courageous nine-day strike in West Virginia, where teachers initially defied the union's demand that they return to work midway through the strike, contacting one another through social media and voting to remain out in support of their demands.

But because the school employees had not built up their own organization, independent of the union, the union was eventually able to reassert its control and impose a sellout deal, which funded paltry wage increases through deep cuts to social programs including Medicaid, and did nothing to address teachers' central concern of soaring health care costs.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on teachers and support workers to form rank-and-file committees, democratically elected by workers in every school and community, to block all efforts by the unions to hijack the strike. These committees should organize joint action with teachers in other states across the country and internationally. Preparations must be made for an unlimited, nationwide general strike, mobilizing the whole working class as well as student youth in defense of the right to public education and all the rights of the working class.

The development of independent organizations must be connected to the building of a political movement of the working class, directed at the Democratic and Republican politicians and the social and economic system they uphold.

The OEA has insisted that public education can only be defended if workers "remember in November" and vote for Democrats in the November 2018 midterm elections. But the Democrats, under Republican Governor Mary Fallin's predecessor Brad Henry, led the way in slashing the top income tax rate and capital gains tax and slashing social spending. And it was the Obama administration that oversaw the expansion of charter schools and the destruction of over 300,000 teachers' and school workers' jobs across the country, while funneling trillions of dollars to the banks and investors in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash.

Teachers must reject the perspective—advocated by Facebook pages such as Oklahoma Teachers United, which has banned posts of WSWS articles—that the teachers' fight is "apolitical." Long historical experience in the workers' movement has shown that those organizations that say that "politics must be kept

out" of strikes are in fact those who are determined to keep teachers tied to the Democratic Party and trade union bureaucracy and prevent a discussion of socialist politics.

Facebook pages like OTU won a widespread following among teachers who have used social media to break free of the stranglehold of the unions. The OTU, however, is now promoting the fatal illusion that the unions and state Democrats can be pressured to defend teachers, and that the fight for public education does not require an independent political mobilization of the working class. In doing so, it is leading teachers down a dead end.

Teachers must proceed from the standpoint, not of what the ruling class declares it can or cannot "afford," but rather what must be done to ensure the social rights of the working class, including to a well-resourced, high-quality public education system, healthcare, a secure retirement, and decent jobs for all. The corporate media and both parties all howl that there is "no money." But they have found trillions of dollars to bail out the banks since 2008, provide new corporate tax cuts, and allocate more than \$700 billion every year for the Pentagon to invade and destroy countries all around the world.

The fight for the social rights of the working class inevitably poses the question of which social class decides how society's wealth is allocated: the working class, the great mass of the population that produces all of society's wealth, or the corporate elite, represented by both the Democrats and the Republicans. The reorganization of society according to social needs and genuine equality means the fight for socialism. This is the perspective advanced by the SEP. We urge teachers and other workers and youth who agree with this perspective to contact us today.



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