

Mass turnout at state capitol as Oklahoma teachers' strike enters second week

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In one of the largest turnouts since the statewide strike by Oklahoma teachers began on April 2, thousands of educators and their supporters protested inside and outside the state capitol in Oklahoma City Monday, as the walkout by nearly 40,000 teachers began its second week.

The *Tulsa World*, which wrote that there was “no end in sight” for the strike, reported that the walkout had shut down school districts serving at least 500,000 of the state’s 700,000 public school students on Monday. Scores of districts, including Oklahoma City, have announced that schools will also be closed at least through Tuesday because of the walkout.

Despite efforts by the unions to wear down strikers by isolating their struggle and limiting it to impotent appeals to a hostile state legislature, teachers have remained resolute in their demand for a \$10,000 pay increase and restoration of school funding to pre-2008 levels. The strike was launched after teachers rejected a last-minute deal, hailed as “historic” by the unions, that would have left the state still near the bottom in terms of teacher pay and per-pupil spending.

Thousands of teachers marched the 14 miles from the Oklahoma City suburb of Edmond to the state capitol Monday, while a delegation of teachers from Tulsa continued their 110-mile trek to the capitol. Daisy, who teaches in Edmond, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “There were way more people than have ever been here since it started. We have to stand strong. We walked today with my colleagues, teachers and community members. There were more than 1,400 people who marched.”

While the unions have promoted state Democrats as the champions of public education, the school crisis in Oklahoma, like the rest of the country, is the product of a bipartisan assault on public education by both big-business parties. School funding has been reduced by 30 percent over the past decade, even as Republican Governor Mary Fallin and her Democratic predecessor, Brad Henry, slashed taxes on the oil and gas industry and cut income and capital gains taxes for the richest state residents.

The battle in Oklahoma is part of a national and

international rebellion of educators following the nine-day strike in West Virginia. Teachers in Kentucky organized sickouts last week and rallied at the state capitol in Frankfort and the eastern coal country town of Pikeville against deep attacks on their pensions and retiree health benefits. Nearly the entire student body—about 640 in total—walked out of the Pike County Central High School to support their teachers. Governor Matt Bevin and the state legislature are slashing retiree benefits as they reduce taxes for corporations and the wealthy.

In Arizona, thousands of teachers protested in Phoenix and other cities to demand a 20 percent pay raise last week, even as the state’s governor, Doug Ducey, has refused to budge from a 1 percent pay offer.

“This needs to go nationwide,” Val, a physical education teacher in Oklahoma told the WSW. “When they cut retirement and hide it in a sewerage bill like in Kentucky, that’s what there needs to be—a nationwide strike.”

Far from uniting teachers against the nationwide assault on public education, the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state affiliates have done everything to divide and weaken teachers. With demands for statewide strikes spreading from Kentucky, Arizona and South Carolina to Florida, Iowa and Texas, the unions have warned teachers that strikes are illegal and would lead to “harsh consequences.” The Kentucky Education Association denounced the “continued calls for action that deprive students, parents and communities of the educational services we provide.”

Trump’s education secretary Betsy DeVos used remarkably similar terms to inveigh against striking Oklahoma teachers last week. “We need to stay focused on what’s right for kids,” the billionaire heiress and unabashed enemy of public education told the *Dallas Morning News*. “I hope that adults would keep adult disagreements and disputes in a separate place and serve the students that are there to be served.”

The supposed concern for the children and disdain for

teachers' "adult concerns" about wages, class sizes, funding, etc. have been used by every administration to wage an unrelenting war against public education and teachers' conditions. This includes the Clintons and their "school choice" agenda of the 1990s, George Bush's "No Child Left Behind" in the early 2000s, Obama's "Race to the Top" from 2009 to 2016, and finally Trump's "Every Student Succeeds Act."

The Trump administration's budget, which was passed with Democratic support, included \$400 million for charter school grants, a \$58 million or 17 percent increase over the previous year.

The congressional overhaul of the tax code, the *Detroit News* reported, will also allow parents to use tax-deductible savings plans to help cover tuition at public, private and religious elementary and high schools. The Education Department recently approved Texas's plan to use Title I funding for low-income children to create charter schools, instead of using the money only to improve existing schools. This would set a precedent for every state to divert more public money to for-profit charter businesses.

"She is for school privatization," Val said of DeVos. "They have never been in a public school before. They're fighting for the rich." The Oklahoma teacher also said the strike should be addressing itself to the issue of teachers' medical and retirement costs. "I know a teacher who was going to retire next year at 52, but if she does, she will have her daughter, son and her on her insurance, so she would only have \$500 left a month to live on."

The unions are looking to cut some deal with the state Democrats and Republicans, involving some cosmetic gesture to increase funding in order to shut down the strike.

The unions insist the funding crisis must be resolved by "working within the system" on a state-by-state basis, which invariably means supporting increases in regressive taxes or cuts in other vital services to make up for trillions being squandered at every level of the government to fund bank bailouts, corporate tax cuts and endless wars for big business.

Relentless wage cutting and austerity to fuel ever-higher corporate profits is the consensus policy of both big-business parties. On Sunday, *Washington Post* business columnist Robert Samuelson said wages and funding were only the superficial causes of the teachers' strikes. "The deeper cause is that teachers—and schools—are competing with the elderly for scarce funds," he claimed before advocating cuts to Medicare and Social Security.

The teachers' rebellion was initiated and has been driven by rank-and-file teachers, both unionized and nonunion, who have used social media to organize after years of betrayals by the unions. As Ed Allen, the leader of the Oklahoma City

AFT, told National Public Radio last week, "Never have I thought" the union would be negotiating with legislators on the one side and teachers on the other. "How do you negotiate with Facebook?" he asked.

Val expressed the determination of rank-and-file teachers to continue the strike for their demands of wage and school funding increases. "We're not going to accept it. Whether the union says no or yes, we'll still be out here."

If the teachers are to prevail, they must decisively break with the unions and build new organizations—rank-and-file committees elected in every school and community—to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. Any illusion that the unions—which are thoroughly integrated into the structure of the government and corporate management, and fully support austerity—can be reformed and forced to fight, would doom this struggle to failure.

Rank-and-file committees should break through the isolation of this strike, and fight to unite all teachers and every section of the working class together in preparation for a general strike to defend public education and all the social rights of the working class.

This struggle has thrust teachers into a conflict not only with the Republican governor and state legislature but both big-business parties and the capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of life to the ever-greater enrichment of a corporate and financial elite. That is why this is a political struggle, which necessitates the building of a mass political and socialist movement of the working class to take political power and allocate society's resources to meet human needs, not corporate profit.



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