

Oklahoma teachers' strike continues as governor rejects funding demands

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11 April 2018

The Republican governor and state legislature in Oklahoma have refused to budge on any new school funding measures as the strike by tens of thousands of teachers enters its eighth day today. Nearly 40,000 educators in the southwestern state walked out on April 2 to demand a \$10,000 raise and the restoration of school funding, which has been cut by nearly 30 percent over the last decade.

After more than a week of mass protests inside and outside the state capitol in Oklahoma City, Governor Mary Fallin signed a bill Tuesday repealing a \$5 hotel/motel tax. The Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) had called on Fallin to maintain the tax as part of funding proposal that the union said would be enough to end the strike. Republican leaders of the state House of Representatives have also rejected out-of-hand the OEA's proposal to remove reductions on capital gains taxes, saying they would not even hear a bill before the legislature adjourns on May 25.

The OEA has sought to hijack the powerful strike by Oklahoma educators and shut it down based on maneuvers with state Democrats and Republicans to add approximately \$50 million to a spending bill. The was rejected as wholly inadequate by teachers who face not only near poverty wages, but overcrowded classrooms and a chronic shortage of supplies. Teachers want at least \$200 million in additional funding and a \$5,000 raise for the even more poorly paid school aides and other support staff.

Ignoring the demands of striking teachers, OEA President Alicia Priest reiterated that the union would call the strike off if the governor and state legislature came up with \$50 million more. "They've passed \$456 million. We've asked for \$506 million in the first year. And when you do the math, that does break down to \$50-million," Priest told local media outlet News 9 Tuesday. "So, we're 90 percent of the way there." Referring to the rejection of

the unions' proposals, Priest added, "That's just one route on a roadmap to get to a final destination. There are many other routes to get there."

The OEA does not speak for teachers. On the contrary, from the beginning the OEA and the smaller Oklahoma City American Federation of Teachers opposed a strike and hailed the first pay raise and spending measure as "historic." After rank-and-file teachers, using social media, rejected the sellout and walked out, the OEA and AFT have done nothing but try to sabotage the struggle and demoralize teachers with impotent and fruitless appeals to bought-and-paid-for politicians.

The heroic struggle by Oklahoma teachers is in danger. If they are to prevail, teachers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by electing rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to mobilize workers throughout the state and join with teachers across the US to prepare a general strike. Teachers do not lack courage and determination, they lack organization and leadership.

Tens of thousands of teachers defied the union and organized the strike through the Facebook pages Oklahoma Teachers Walkout-the Time is Now! and Oklahoma Teachers United. However, the leaders of these groups have promoted the fatal illusion that the struggle can be won by pressuring the unions to reform and by working with the state Democrats, who while posturing as friends of the teachers are no less enemies of public education than Republicans.

The allies of teachers are not big business politicians but teachers throughout the United States and the world who are engaged in similar struggles. Teachers in Kentucky are organizing for more protests at the state capitol in Frankfort on Friday to oppose the destruction of their pensions and retiree health benefits. Teachers in Arizona have carried out protests to demand a 20 percent raise.

In the face of growing demands by teachers around the

country to reverse decades of budget cuts and attacks on their living standards by Democratic and Republican administrations alike, the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state affiliates are doing everything possible to prevent the linking up of these statewide struggles into a nationwide battle. Union officials in Florida, Iowa and other states have told teachers that strikes are illegal and will result in fines, dismissals and even jailing, while echoing the lies of Trump's Education Secretary Betsy DeVos that teacher strikes "hurt children."

The strikebreaking role of the unions is not merely due to the cowardice and corruption of the top union officials. The unions are anti-working class organizations, controlled by privileged upper-middle-class executives, that worked for decades to suppress the class struggle and isolate and defeat every strike that has erupted.

The national leaders of the teachers' unions—AFT President Randi Weingarten, who made \$492,563 last year, and NEA President Lily Garcia, who made \$348,732—run corporatist businesses that impose the dictates of Wall Street in exchange for state recognition, the collection of unions dues and a "seat at the table."

In addition to their high salaries, the AFT and NEA executives manage giant pension funds valued in the hundreds of billions of dollars. These include the California State Teachers' Retirement System (\$224 billion), the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Associates-College Retirement Equities Fund (\$148 billion), the New York State Teachers Retirement System (\$75 billion) and smaller funds in Oklahoma (\$12 billion) and other states.

While near poverty-level retiree benefits are paid to teachers who have labored in classrooms their entire working lives, the union executives who are trustees and manage these funds are rewarded with fees and lucrative business opportunities from hedge funds and private equity firms.

Nearly 73 percent of public pensions are funded through investment returns and employee contributions, not from state and local governments. In a perverse way, the unions benefit from maintaining low wages because this drives large numbers of young or mid-career teachers out of the profession before they can collect any or all of the retiree benefits they accrued from paying into the funds.

In October 2010, Weingarten set up an Ad Hoc Committee on Revenues and Retirement Security to secure the investments of the unions by slashing the already meager pensions teachers receive.

Among the proposals were:

- "Eliminate spiking at the end of a career, which artificially increases the pension benefit."

- "Eliminate double-dipping. Responsibly limit the payment of both a pension and a salary to any employee who is rehired after retirement by the same employer."

- "Establish a maximum benefit ceiling on the employer-sponsored defined-benefit portion of an employee's pension. The purpose of a ceiling is to guard against any excessively high defined-benefit payment."

The entire strategy of the American ruling class has been to suppress wages so interest rates can remain low and financial speculators can borrow money cheaply to invest in and drive up the value of the stock market. The wave of teacher strikes and the developing "wages push" by American workers has rattled the stock markets and caused several recent selloffs.

The last thing the AFT and NEA executives want is a unified movement of the teachers, which would threaten corporate America and their own investments. In other words, in the class struggle being waged by teachers, the unions are on the other side. That is why teachers must build rank-and-file committees to take the struggle into their own hands and spearhead a powerful counter-offensive by the working class against both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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