

“The unions are trying to shut down a growing nationwide movement”

Oklahoma teachers denounce Oklahoma Education Association’s move to end strike

Niles Niemuth in Oklahoma City
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Oklahoma teachers voiced their anger and determination to continue their more than a week-and-a-half long strike following a back-to-work order announced by Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) President Alicia Priest Thursday afternoon.

Teachers have been on strike since the beginning of April, demanding a \$10,000 pay increase and the restoration of a decade of funding cuts. Educators have been using social media to organize protests and walkouts in defiance of the unions, which have sought to head off the insurgent movement at every opportunity by cutting backroom deals with Republican Governor Mary Fallin and the Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature.

In signs of opposition to the unions’ efforts to wind down the strike, students and teachers at Moore Public Schools walked out Thursday after being called back to work. Schools in Oklahoma City are scheduled to reopen on Monday, and Tulsa schools are set to be back in session on Tuesday. Smaller school districts across the state have already returned to regularly scheduled classes.

In response to the fraudulent claim by Priest that 70 percent of teachers want to end the walkout, teachers posted on social media insisting that this was not true.

“As an OEA member, I didn’t get a poll,” said Gabrielle. “I got a survey from the NEA how the OEA is representing us. I was never asked in the last 24 hours whether or not the walkout should continue. And that really upsets me ... So I won’t be at school Monday or on Tuesday. I’ll be at the Capitol because the fight is not up.”

Jenna, a school counsellor, wrote, “A group of teachers caught OEA President Alicia Priest outside of the OEA offices Wednesday, April 11. Many people in this group had heard news sources that stated OEA was pulling out of the walkout. We wanted clarification on the handout provided that day by OEA.”

She added, “Priest said OEA planned to be at the Capitol tomorrow, and the next day, and we have permits into next week. I am sad because at least in the Capitol they may not have been honest, but they weren’t blatantly lying. Alicia Priest is not my president.”

“The OEA didn’t ask the teachers before they announced the strike was over,” an Oklahoma City teacher protesting at the Capitol Thursday afternoon told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “These union officials haven’t spent time in our kindergarten classrooms. We don’t feel anything has been resolved. It’s more than a pay raise, it’s about resources for the schools. We spend money out of our pockets for supplies.

“The OEA came out with an announcement that they won 95 percent of our demands. Where did they get that number from? Even some of the state legislators said the OEA was ready to walk out of the state capitol before the teachers walked in.

“I do feel the unions are trying to shut down a growing nationwide movement of teachers who are rising up to fight. They don’t want that. They want ‘labor peace,’ but meanwhile the rich keep getting more, and we don’t get anything.”

“It’s not satisfactory and it isn’t over,” a school aide

from the Oklahoma City Public Schools told the WSWS. “This has just begun. The teacher solidarity and the support from the parents is not going to go away even if the OEA tries to call this off. This movement was not started by the unions; it was started by the starving. If my husband wasn’t working, there would be no way I could live on what I get paid. The \$1,250 raise isn’t going to change that. I know aides making \$1,000 a month.

“There are 30-40 kids in a classroom. I work in a Title I school, and the kids come to class after sleeping one day at an aunt’s house, the next day at a cousin’s. Many are homeless and hungry. You can’t listen in class and do well if your stomach is growling. Then there are these people making billions off the backs of workers. You have billionaires like [Education Secretary] Betsy DeVos saying the teachers are hurting the children by striking. But the teachers are doing this for the children.”

Numerous teachers turned to Facebook to declare their intention to cancel their union membership in response to the sellout. “Cancel your OEA memberships so they hear you loudly,” said Chris. Another teacher, Deanna, agreed, saying, “YES! I say everyone walks over to their office and pulls their membership.”

“No one cares what the OEA says,” noted Britni in response to the OEA declaration that the walkouts are over. “Show them what a wildcat strike is,” wrote Wendy.

Writing to the admin of the “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout – The Time is Now” Facebook page, one teacher said, “I’m sure your heart was in the right place, but I warned about the union and getting close to them and posted messages you wouldn’t approve. I begged people not to trust the OEA... for those reasons I can’t support your efforts any more. I mean the freaking OEA is taking credit for the funding the legislature passed. Are you kidding? I can only get on board if you denounce the OEA and [Oklahoma’s State Superintendent of Public Instruction] Joy Hofmeister. “

Sherri, and other teachers, agreed with his assessment, “I voiced my concerns about letting OEA hitch to our wagon from the beginning but was harassed by OEA diehards.”

One teacher, Andrew, noted the close connections between the OEA and Governor Marry Fallin. Priest

was appointed to the National Education Board of Directors by Fallin and served on the Oklahoma Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Commission. Priest makes about \$93,000 per year while most Oklahoma teachers survive on a poverty wage.

Educators from other states also weighed in on social media to express solidarity with the teachers in Oklahoma.

Callista, a teacher in Arizona, spoke out in support of the Oklahoma teachers and denounced the OEA, “Arizona stands in solidarity with you Oklahoma! Don’t fold! We are up next! Shame on you OEA!”

Dustin, a West Virginia teacher relayed the role of the unions in shutting down their strike in February. “This happened to us in West Virginia as well! All three of our unions said that the strike was over. The entire state said that it wasn’t! Just know that we did it and you will too! You have our support!”



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