

Union seeks to shut down strike: The way forward for Oklahoma teachers

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Striking teachers are reacting with shock and anger at the announcement by the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) Thursday that it is trying to force teachers to end their strike and surrender their demands for a livable wage and the restoration of more than a decade in school cuts.

Teachers throughout the state are holding discussions on how to continue the fight despite the actions of the OEA and the pronouncements by Governor Mary Fallin and the media that the strike is over.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers to move now to form independent rank-and-file committees and issue an urgent appeal to teachers throughout the country and all workers to support them in their fight for public education.

In a press conference Thursday afternoon, OEA President Alicia Priest said she was calling off the strike because Republican senate leaders “decided they did not want to move forward in any way to have a resolution of support for the future or any other support for public ed funding or revenue sources this year, so that is the big change.”

What a declaration of bankruptcy! The OEA is telling teachers they should abandon their fight because the politicians oppose them. Teachers have known this for years. That is why they went on strike in the first place.

If history teaches us anything, it is that every right workers have won—including the right to public education—was only the result of a determined and collective battle.

To justify its treachery, Priest tried to blame the union’s capitulation on teachers themselves, saying 70 percent of those polled doubted that continued efforts would enact the legislative change needed. “If what you’re doing isn’t getting the results you seek, there is wisdom in shifting focus,” she said. The claim that

teachers support a return to work is a flat-out lie.

Contrary to the claim of Priest, the strike has not failed. It has won popular support from parents, students and other workers throughout the state, and from educators throughout the US and the world. From the beginning, however, the OEA has sought to hijack and sabotage it and to impose a defeat upon teachers.

The strength of the teachers lies in the fact that they are fighting for the same things all workers want: good wages, affordable health care, good working conditions, and high quality public education. If a fight is to be waged, then the power of the entire working class must be mobilized.

The Oklahoma strike was initiated by rank-and-file teachers, not the unions. It was inspired by the teachers’ revolt in West Virginia and the spreading demands for statewide strikes in Arizona, Kentucky and other states. In every case, the unions have functioned not as the organizers of resistance but as strikebreakers. In Florida, Iowa and other states, the unions have warned teachers that strikes are illegal and they will face “harsh consequences.”

The last thing the unions want is a nation-wide rebellion by teachers, which threatens the NEA and AFT’s relations with the Democrats and Republicans and the corporate interests they serve. But uniting all these struggles is precisely what is needed if teachers are to oppose the bipartisan assault on public education, which is now being escalated by President Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

The formation of rank-and-file committees in every school and community is the basis for taking the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the corporatist and anti-working class organizations that call themselves “unions.” Teachers meeting around the state today and over the weekend should constitute

themselves as such committees.

As their first order of business, these committees should issue an appeal to parents and all workers explaining the fundamental issues in this fight, and why teachers need not only moral support but the active participation of all workers. The strike must continue, and any effort by local school authorities to victimize striking teachers should be met with a general strike by all workers.

At the same time, these committees should strengthen the ties of Oklahoma teachers with their brothers and sisters in Arizona, Kentucky and other states. An emergency meeting should be called with rank-and-file delegates from around the country to prepare for a nation-wide strike to defend the right to high quality public education.

Such a movement must be completely independent of the NEA and AFT, which first sold out the heroic strike in West Virginia and is trying to do the same thing in Oklahoma. These organizations, controlled by upper-middle-class executives and wedded to the capitalist system, cannot be reformed. New organizations, democratically controlled by the rank-and-file, must be built that do not accept the subordination of the rights of teachers and all workers to the wealth of the corporate and financial elite.

The struggle of teachers is part of a resurgence of the class struggle throughout the US and internationally against years of austerity and wage cutting. Every individual struggle—against social inequality, attacks on democratic rights and war—must be united.

Anyone who says the fight for public education is not a political struggle is obscuring the real issues. It is political precisely because it is a struggle between two contending classes. The teachers, who speak for the working class, can only attain the necessary resources to defend and vastly improve public education through a frontal assault on the entrenched power and wealth of the corporate and financial elite.

This means a fight against both big business parties, the Democrats and Republicans, and the capitalist system they defend. If society's resources are to be used for the common good, not the further enrichment of a few and on new and even more catastrophic wars, then the working class must take political power in its own hands. The reorganization of society according to social needs and genuine equality means the fight for

socialism.



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