

Anger grows over union effort to sabotage Oklahoma teachers strike

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Oklahoma teachers have reacted defiantly to the Oklahoma Education Association's (OEA) call to end their two-week strike. Thousands of teachers and their supporters converged on the state capitol Friday, the day after the union urged them to return to their classrooms.

After being given the green light by the OEA to force teachers back to work, school districts across the state, including the largest in Oklahoma City, Tulsa and Broken Arrow, announced Friday that they were instructing teachers to return to work Monday.

The militant mood of teachers was spelled on the signs they were carrying Friday, including, "OEA doesn't speak for me," "The movement didn't start with the OEA and won't end with the OEA," and "We're not leaving." Outside and inside the capitol, teachers held impromptu meetings to discuss how to sustain their walkout next week.

"The unions don't want a popular outcry and they are trying to sabotage this struggle," Misty, a young teacher from the Oklahoma City area, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Teachers in Louisiana and other states are looking for a way to fight, and they should be brought into this. The unions and the media don't want teachers in the rest of the country to know about our fight in Oklahoma, and they don't want us to know what is happening across the US."

The teachers walked out on April 2 to demand improved wages and the restoration of school funding following decades of budget cuts. The strike, which was initiated by rank-and-file teachers using social media, followed the nine-day strike by West Virginia teachers, one-day strikes at schools in Puerto Rico and Jersey City, New Jersey, and demands for walkouts by teachers in Kentucky, Arizona and other states.

Also on Friday, thousands of teachers, other school workers, public sector workers and supporters descended on the capitol in Frankfort, Kentucky to defend their pensions. Facing growing demands for a statewide strike, the Kentucky Education Association (KEA) called for a "day of action," making clear it was not to be a strike and that only teachers who could "legally" attend should do so. Many

teachers defied the KEA mandate, angrily stating on social media that they would stay out until their demands for pensions and education funding were won.

The National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state affiliates are doing everything they can to prevent joint action by educators across the country against the bipartisan assault on public education, which has been aided and abetted by the unions. In a *New York Times* article declaring the Oklahoma strike over, AFT President Randi Weingarten expressed hope that teachers' anger could be diverted behind a campaign to elect Democrats in the 2018 elections.

On Friday, OEA President Alicia Priest was the main speaker at an event sponsored by the Tulsa County Democratic Party. She justified selling out the teachers by saying that nothing could be done to oppose the Republican-controlled legislature except to vote in Democrats in November.

The Democrats, however, have proven to be as ruthless an enemy of teachers and public education as the Republicans. In Oklahoma, former Governor Brad Henry, a Democrat, slashed capital gains and income taxes on the wealthy and carried out deep cuts to state funding, paving the way for current Republican Governor Mary Fallin.

On a national scale, the Obama administration oversaw the elimination of the jobs of some 300,000 teachers and other school employees and a vast expansion of for-profit charter schools, even as it handed over trillions to bail out the Wall Street banks. President Trump and his billionaire education secretary, Betsy DeVos, are now escalating the attack on public education.

The actions of the union have provoked an outpouring of anger among teachers. Misty, the Oklahoma teacher, said, "I talked to [OEA President] Alicia Priest on Wednesday after the OEA said we had won 95 percent of our demands. She said we had done a good job. I suspected they were going to say, 'We are done with the strike.' On Thursday, I went up to the OEA table around noon and asked if they were going to stop supporting the strike. They said, 'Absolutely not. We

will continue this strike.’ By 4 p.m., Priest was holding a press conference calling it off.

“I am not a member because the OEA wouldn’t do anything to protect me. It’s not a union for teachers like they portray themselves. It’s a business, and they’ve proven it again.”

A veteran teacher from Oklahoma City added, “Teachers from Massachusetts are talking to us about walking out and doing so without the union. Teachers are the sort that work within the rules. We’ve been trying to work with the legislators and let the unions speak on our behalf, but nothing has stopped these budget cuts. We decided we weren’t going to take it anymore.”

The Oklahoma City-American Federation of Teachers, which like the OEA opposed the strike from the beginning, acknowledged Friday that a poll it had conducted showed overwhelming support for the continuation of the strike. Despite this, school officials in the state’s largest school district announced Friday night that they would open schools Monday morning.

Explaining why she was still on strike, Rachel, a third-grade teacher, told the WSWs, “My only purpose is for my students. Last night when Alicia Priest announced that OEA was dropping us and trying to push us out of this walkout, all I could think about was going back into my classroom and facing those 42 eyes and saying, ‘You’re not worth it.’ Because they are worth it.

“I will be here every day fighting for them, writing emails, whatever needs to happen to ensure they get the education they deserve. They deserve new textbooks, they deserve funding, they deserve materials. And teachers deserve that as well, so we can be the most effective teachers that we can and we can provide for our students in a way that they deserve.”

Asked about teachers in other states, including Kentucky, Arizona and West Virginia, protesting and striking for better pay and funding, Rachel responded, “I think that shows that in Oklahoma and all across the nation educators are rising up and saying that we’ve had enough, students are now more important and we’re going to do whatever it takes to make sure they get what they deserve. I feel inspired that teachers just like me are standing up in their states and against their legislators.”

Hundreds of teachers gathered inside the state capitol during the protest Friday for a meeting to discuss their demands and the way forward. The meeting was called by Alberto Morejon, a teacher in Stillwater, Oklahoma who started the Facebook page “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout—The Time is Now!” which quickly grew to 70,000 members.

To the applause of teachers, Morejon stated, “Teachers

started this and we are not ending it until teachers say so.” However, he presented no viable strategy to advance the struggle, saying instead that teachers and parents should continue to lobby state legislators who are controlled by powerful corporate interests, including the oil and gas industry, and are determined to continue starving public education to fund corporate tax cuts.

Morejon told teachers that if their schools reopened Monday, they should appeal to their school superintendents to allow a few teacher-delegates to go to the state capital to continue “lobbying.” Multiple teachers insisted that they did not want to fund education by imposing regressive taxes on working-class families, let alone through other budget cuts to essential services like mental health.

During the discussion this reporter said that the most powerful action of the West Virginia teachers was when they defied the back-to-work order of the unions, and that Oklahoma teachers should do the same. Teachers shouted their support for the call to reach out to teachers in Kentucky, Arizona and other states and prepare a general strike by educators and all workers and a political struggle against the Democrats and Republicans.

If the struggle in Oklahoma is not to be defeated, teachers must elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community, not to “lobby” the politicians, but to mobilize the broadest support in the working class against any attempt to victimize striking teachers.

The struggle in Oklahoma will be immeasurably strengthened through establishing a network of rank-and-file committees across the country to prepare a nationwide strike to defend public education against both big business parties, which are squandering trillions on corporate tax cuts and new and even bloodier wars.



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