

Unions shut down Oklahoma teachers strike

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Tens of thousands of Oklahoma teachers returned to their classrooms Monday morning after their two-week walkout was shut down by the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and the Oklahoma City-American Federation of Teachers (AFT). While hundreds of teachers made individual decisions to use sick days and personal days to show up at the state capitol Monday, the mass of teachers have been demobilized by the OEA and AFT.

The teachers, who waged a courageous fight for improved wages and increased school funding for their students were not defeated; they were betrayed. A poll on the Facebook page, “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout-The Time is Now!” showed that 88.3 percent of teachers wanted to continue the strike, but the majority said they could not afford to lose more pay. Teachers in the state capital of Oklahoma City voted 2-1 to continue the strike, according to a poll by the AFT.

After years of collusion between the unions and successive Democratic and Republican state governments, which cut school spending by nearly 30 percent over the last decade, teachers, using social media, launched the walkout on April 2. The unions opposed the strike at first and then tried to regain control of the movement to smother it and shut it down.

Announcing that the OEA was ending support for the strike last Thursday, OEA President Alicia Priest made the lying claim that teachers had won 95 percent of their demands. In fact, teachers, who are near the bottom in the US in wages, demanded a \$10,000 pay increase but got an average of only \$6,100. They demanded \$200 million in additional school funding but the state government agreed to less than \$50 million, largely paid for through regressive taxes on fuel, cigarettes and gaming.

Teachers demanded \$5,000 raises for school aides, school bus drivers and other support staff, many who live at or below poverty. Instead, they got \$1,250. Finally, teachers demanded \$7,500 in pay raises for other public employees, many of whom joined the strike, but they received only derisory raises of \$750 to \$2,000.

Lat Friday, the day after Priest told teachers to go back to work, thousands defiantly returned to the capitol to continue their protests, carrying signs like “OEA doesn’t speak for me” “OEA didn’t start this they cannot end it.” Hundreds canceled their union memberships.

Andy, an Oklahoma City teacher, told the *World Socialist*

Web Site, “The role of the union was to pretend that it had something to do with this strike and then to end it. Everybody would still have kept going if it wasn’t for the OEA. They said, ‘Good job, now go home.’”

“Education is part of a bigger problem. The state of Oklahoma doesn’t spend money on the mentally ill or for poor kids. They talk this Reaganomics stuff where they give tax cuts to the oil, gas and coal industries and that it will trickle down to us. But they are not going to give it back. It would be great to unify teachers across the country.”

There is little doubt that the OEA was instructed to end the strike by the national teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The biggest factor behind the intervention of the unions was to prevent the Oklahoma struggle from linking up with teachers across the US who are rebelling after suffering a five percent fall in real wages over the last decade and savage school cuts, attacks that were aided and abetted by the unions.

On Monday, hundreds of teachers in Colorado—46th in the nation in pay—protested at the state capitol, leading to the closure of schools in the Denver-Aurora area. Teachers in Kentucky, Arizona and other states are also pressing for statewide strikes to defend pensions and demand pay raises. The Brookings Institution recently warned that teacher strikes could erupt next in Indiana, Texas, North Carolina, Mississippi, Idaho and many other states.

In state after state, the unions are trying to intimidate and dissuade teachers from striking. A statement from the Arizona Education Association, recently circulated to teachers, warned that those engaging in a walkout “may face loss of pay, discipline or dismissal, and some form of action against their certificates.” The same threatening messages have been sent to teachers in Florida, Iowa and other states.

Fueling the movement among teachers has been the relentless budget-cutting and staff reduction carried out by states since the 2008 financial crash. Twenty-nine states have lower per pupil spending than a decade ago. Despite an increase in enrollment of three percent, many districts have not hired staff to replace those laid off during the Great Recession. This has led to larger class sizes and ever-greater demands on teachers.

As in West Virginia, it was rank-and-file teachers, not the unions, who initiated the strike. Oklahoma teachers showed enormous courage and ingenuity, using Facebook pages and

other social media to coordinate mass protests at the state capitol. In the end, however, the leaders of the two Facebook groups, “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout-The Time is Now!” and “Oklahoma Teachers United” were opposed to an independent policy for teachers and echoed the same false claims as the unions that state Democrats could be relied on to defend public education. Because of this, the unions were able to reassert control and shut down the strike.

The state’s Republican governor, Mary Fallin, and the state legislature steadfastly refused to provide any additional funding after handing over billions in tax cuts to the oil, gas and coal industries that dominate the state. The Democrats, for their part, fully backed the insulting pay and school funding bill rejected by teachers and sought to cover up their own role in the funding crisis.

Fallin’s Democratic predecessor, Brad Henry, implemented capital gains and income tax reductions for the rich while slashing funding for public education and other essential services. On the federal level, the Obama years saw a relentless attack on teachers and public education and a vast expansion of for-profit charter schools, which have paved the way for an expansion of this assault by Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

The unions are desperately trying to smother further teacher strikes and divert opposition behind the election of Democrats in the 2018 elections. This was spelled out in an opinion piece in *USA Today* by AFT President Randi Weingarten, who wrote, “At a time when teachers’ agency is routinely being gutted by attacks on their profession and their right to organize, teachers realize that their weapon is their vote and their mission is the upcoming elections.”

A veteran teacher from Shawnee, 38 miles to the east of Oklahoma City, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Teachers in Arizona, Kentucky, Colorado and other states are moving, and we need an organization to step up and unite this movement nationally. The NEA and the AFT have failed us. The situation is the same everywhere.

“There is a new bill coming up in Oklahoma to pay for our raises by taking money from our pensions. The legislators and the corporate heads don’t care. The tax on oil and gas production here is only 3.2 percent, compared to 8.3 percent in Texas and 12 percent in Arkansas, and the state is actually paying energy companies to use our wind. Meanwhile, our schools are so short of supplies we have to get used paper with printing on one side to use on our copy machines.”

Aaron, who teaches at an Oklahoma City school in a poor, mostly Hispanic neighborhood, said, “It’s frustrating that the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor. None of this affects the governor and the legislators who have money to send their kids to the best schools.

“In our schools we have shortages of books, and some kids are struggling with hunger. Parents are scrambling to make ends meet with the fathers working in construction and

landscaping and the mothers working as waitresses, housecleaners and other hard jobs.

“It’s getting like it is in Mexico where in some school districts kids have to buy their textbooks and pay for everything starting as early as elementary school. There it is such a matter of pride just to graduate high school.”

William, an Oklahoma City teacher with 35 years who also taught school in Puerto Rico, compared the situation in Oklahoma to the US territory in the Caribbean. “It’s the same all over. In the 1990s we went on strike in Puerto Rico to defend public education, but it has gotten worse since then. The education secretary, Julia Keleher, wants to move things backward. She is using New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina as a model to privatize schools in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. She wants to give money to parents to put their kids into Catholic schools. We don’t need another system to drain funds from the public schools.”

Since the beginning of the strike, the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* has called on teachers to elect rank-and-file committees in their schools and districts to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions. Rather than fruitless “lobbying” appeals to Republicans and Democrats, the *WSWS* urged teachers to reach out to the broadest sections of the working class in Oklahoma, and to link up their fight with teachers and other workers throughout the country to prepare a general strike.

“The OEA pulled the rug out from underneath us. But they didn’t start this, we did,” Helen, a teacher from Oklahoma City Public Schools told the *WSWS*. “You would think with thousands of teachers coming into the state capitol the legislators might listen to our concerns. But they work for the gas, oil and wind industries, and as long as they are funded by these businesses they are not going to do anything for us.

“Some legislators had the nerve to tell us we were wasting our time. They asked us why we were still here. There were thousands here and they didn’t budge, they said, so what makes us think they will do anything now?

“We are in it for the long haul, even though the OEA tried to bust our bubble. Teachers are fighting all over. The media doesn’t want us to know the truth. But I am for uniting teachers across the country for a common fight.”



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