Arizona teachers voting on state-wide walkout

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On April 10, Republican governor Doug Ducey of Arizona stood in front of TV cameras and announced a “20 percent pay increase by school year 2020” for the state’s teachers. The announcement, however, has been met with considerable, and justifiable, skepticism by tens of thousands of the state’s educators.

Teachers in Tucson Tuesday afternoon lined 17 miles of busy roads, carrying signs and campaigning for public support to their struggle for a substantial pay increase and restoration of funding for public schools. Since early March, the campaign for a state-wide walkout for an immediate 20 percent raise, and millions of dollars for classrooms and student resources has been gaining strength among rank-and-file educators.

Facebook comments and videos show some teachers describing having to work multiple jobs and driving long distances from one job to the next, and facing intolerable teaching conditions in their underfunded schools. Many express the determination of the teachers and support staff for a struggle. It is “way past time to do something. This movement needed to happen when Brewer was Governor. Ducey has made it far worse. Education funding has become so bad in this State that this movement is so long overdue!” commented Pam.

In a video posted Monday on the Facebook page of Arizona Educators United (AEU), the group's leaders outline the plan for taking a vote for a walkout among the state’s 50,000 public school teachers. Noah Karvelis, the initiator of the Facebook group, says, “We don’t have a sustainable revenue source to fund these raises, so what that means is these are empty promises. This doesn’t do enough for our kids and colleagues.”

The AEU began polling on Tuesday and holding a walkout “vote-in” on Wednesday, to be counted by Thursday at 4 p.m. On Saturday there will be a series of community meetings throughout the state to generate support from parents and others. Educators and supporters in hundreds of districts shared their photos of the Wednesday’s “vote-in.”

The governor’s proposal for a teacher pay increase does not include support staff or additional funding for programs or materials, and does not address one of the central concerns of teachers—to return school funding to pre-2008 levels. A typical response to the governor’s offer was posted on the AEU Facebook page from L.E. Cat: “We have the power now. We have the upper hand. Never take the first offer. Now is the time to stick to our principles and stay strong. I don’t trust the incremental increase. That could always go away—and then he will say, ‘I gave you 9%.’ We also need to demand an ongoing plan for funding education, not just teacher pay, and restoring education to pre-recession levels.”

The governor’s offer is a “shell game,” Jane, a veteran teacher in Phoenix, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Ducey has made it abundantly clear he’s anti-public education. I guess he thinks teachers are stupid and don’t remember his callous statements about us.”

According to a recent study by Arizona State University’s Morrison Institute for Public Policy, the pay for elementary school teachers in Arizona, when adjusted for cost of living, ranks 50th in the nation. High school teachers rank 49th. Arizona Educators United’s website (arizonaeducatorsunited.com) lists their demands, beginning with a 20 percent pay increase for all teaching and certified staff for the 2018–19 school year; a return to 2008 funding, with student-teacher ratio of 23:1; no tax cuts until Arizona per-pupil funding reaches the national average; and yearly raises until teacher salaries reach the national average.

David Lujan of the Arizona Center for Economic Progress, appearing in a video on the Facebook page of the Arizona Education Association (AEA) union, explained, “There is not a sustainable revenue source to fund his (Ducey’s) teacher salary increase for future years. He is looking to fund it by sweeping money from other agencies and programs. Schools have $1.1 billion less than they did a decade ago. All state agencies but two were cut after 2008.”

Lujan pointed out that, since 1990, the Arizona legislature has cut taxes every year but one, resulting in a $4.4 billion cut in revenue for state-funded programs. The current legislature is now discussing yet another tax cut for the wealthy—a capital gains tax cut for millionaires with assets over $5 million.

The *Arizona Republic* website reports that Ducey’s plan

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relies on “a sunny view of the state’s financial future” as well as cuts in other programs. The plan would redirect over $35 million from the Department of Environmental Quality and garner $15 million from more sweeping income tax audits and over $10 million from several health and arts programs that the governor is planning to cut from the current budget proposal.

One of the cruelest cuts will be in Medicaid spending, which will affect many poor children in teachers’ classrooms. Arizona is one of ten states that have submitted applications to add work requirements and a five-year lifetime limit on Medicaid benefits for low-income people. In January, the Trump administration gave states the green light to impose work requirements and keep the poor off of their only source of medical care.

The Arizona Education Association (AEA) and AEU waited until after the shutting down of the 10-day strike of Oklahoma teachers before polling teachers for their own walkout. Significantly, it never uses the word “strike” or speaks about shutting down the schools.

Alarmed by the rank-and-file response to the call for a walkout, as in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Kentucky, the AEA, the largest official union, is seeking to suffocate the movement and steer it into futile appeals for legislative action.

The leaders of Arizona Educators United, which began as a rank-and-file group, have ceded control of their organization to the AEA. The Facebook group conspicuously sidesteps setting a date for a walkout, and in one recent video avoided even mentioning a strike, saying, “A strong vote for a walkout provides choices to leverage the legislature, which is why we’re voting…”

The struggle in Arizona is erupting as teachers in states across the country press for strike action to recoup more than a decade in lost wages and demand the restoration of funding cuts.

Teachers in Broward County, Florida are protesting tomorrow. Earlier in the week, a protest by Colorado teachers led to the closing of schools in the Denver-Aurora area.

There are also growing calls for joint nationwide action by teachers, with a Florida teacher posting, “We should gather teachers from Colorado, Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma, West Virginia and FLORIDA to head to Washington!!! Let’s rally for our salaries. We can’t just live on apples! WHO’s with ME?”

The National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are doing everything in their power to block a unified struggle against the Republicans and Democrats. The position of unions is made crystal clear by their arguments in the *Janus v AFSCME* case, which is currently before the Supreme Court. Jason Walta, senior counsel for the National Education Association, warned of the dangers facing the ruling elite and the political establishment if the grip of the unions over workers is weakened.

“It is no coincidence that West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona are all so-called ‘right to work’ states with weak or no public-sector collective bargaining laws," Walta said. "In states like these—where anti-union laws frustrate educators’ ability to come together to advocate for quality public schools *through the stable, formal channels of mature collective bargaining*--the only meaningful option available is for educators to press their demands through mass protest and the disruptions in public services that those entail."

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” Walta declares. “When educators can join together and *bargain effectively as partners* with school administrators, the benefits to all are clear...” (Emphasis added.)

Union-management collusion certainly benefits the state, which can impose austerity without strikes. It also benefits union bureaucrats, who are paid handsomely for betraying teachers. But it is to the detriment of rank-and-file teachers, who have suffered decades of union-backed assaults on their jobs, living standards and classroom conditions.

The struggle to defend public education and the rights of educators cannot be won if it is left in the hands of the unions. This was proven again by the betrayal of the 10-day Oklahoma teachers strike.

Instead, teachers must elect rank-and-file committees, entirely independent of and in opposition to the unions, to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class to defend public education, and to link up with educators and other workers around the country in preparation for a general strike.

The resources for livable wages and high quality public education exist, but they are monopolized by a few and squandered on the lavish lifestyles of the super-rich, endless corporate tax cuts and wars. That is why the teachers’ rebellion should become the starting point for a political counter-offensive of the working class as a whole to fight for a vast redistribution of wealth to meet human need, not corporate profit.

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