

As Arizona, Colorado teachers prepare walkout

Oklahoma teachers warn: Don't trust the unions

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As teachers in Arizona and Colorado prepare to go out on strike next week, educators in Oklahoma are warning teachers that they must take the struggle into their own hands and seek to unify across state lines in order to prevent their strikes from being betrayed by the unions.

On Thursday, Arizona teachers voted by 78 percent for a state-wide walkout. They have demanded an immediate 20 percent pay rise for teachers, wage increases for all other school employees and the restoration of more than \$1 billion in school funding cuts imposed over the past decade. Arizona teachers are among the lowest paid in the nation. Many teachers work two or three jobs, including as Uber drivers and pizza deliverers.

Judy, an Arizona teacher, described the impact of the slashing of school spending in comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Per pupil funding is below 2008 levels,” she said. “We’ve lost librarians, computer teachers, paraprofessionals. We used to have a full-time counselor, now we have no one in that role. We have increased class sizes. Everyone is paying more for benefits. Our governor keeps signing tax cuts for corporations.”

The Arizona Educators United Facebook page, which was set up by Arizona teachers and has grown to nearly 50,000 members, together with the teachers union, the Arizona Education Association, has delayed the walkout date until April 26. The union’s aim is to give Republican Governor Doug Ducey and the state legislature time to come up with a gesture and avert a walkout.

There have been growing demands for a strike in Arizona for more than a month, but the unions worked

to delay a strike vote until they had succeeded in selling out and shutting down the strikes by teachers in Oklahoma and West Virginia. The unions are seeking above all to prevent teachers in different states from linking up so as to prevent a nationwide struggle.

In Colorado, school districts are continuing to announce that they will be forced to close on Friday, April 27, the day after the Arizona walkout, because hundreds of teachers are declaring that they will not report to work. The districts that have already announced they will be closing include Jeffco (86,000 students), Cherry Creek (54,000), Poudre (30,000), Thompson (16,000) and Adam 12 (38,000). Jeffco will also be closing the day before, on April 26.

While the Colorado Education Association has called a state-wide rally on April 27, it has not called for any strike action. The push for a strike is coming from rank-and-file teachers.

Teachers are also pressing for a strike in Kentucky, but the Kentucky Education Association has repeatedly stated that it is opposed to any state-wide walkout.

The teachers’ protests and strikes in the US are part of an expanding wave of strikes by university lecturers and teachers internationally. The past week has seen strikes in the UK, the Netherlands, Lebanon and Kenya.

Teachers in Oklahoma have made statements to the *World Socialist Web Site* and on social media calling on teachers in Arizona to draw the lessons from the betrayal of their 10-day walkout by the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). After channelling the strike behind futile efforts to lobby the big business Democrats and Republicans, both of whom have gutted education spending for decades, the unions abruptly

shut down the strike on April 15 and sent teachers back to work without meeting a single one of their demands.

Sarah, a teacher with Oklahoma City Public Schools in the state's capital, said there needed to be a nationwide strike, which could take place only in opposition to the efforts of the unions to isolate teachers state by state. A national strike "would be amazing," she said. "I think they [the unions] didn't want us united out of fear we would take over. They would lose their position, power/money. Just like insurance. Keep us poor and sick—too sick, too tired, too poor to do anything about it, and living in fear of taking an actual stand."

Sarah issued a warning to her counterparts in Arizona who are preparing to strike: "Don't blindly follow the unions or associations like we did. They WILL give in to pressure from lawmakers and boards. Do NOT believe them when they tell you they won't."

She said teachers needed to "form their own subgroups [on Facebook] now." She continued: "This way we could discuss trying to continue the strike without the backing of our boards, our admin, and the unions. Our fault was not starting these groups until OEA [Oklahoma Education Association, the state affiliate of the NEA] had already called an end to the walkout. Had we had them in place to begin with, we would have been much more prepared and ready to go."

Sarah described the impact of the union's sellout at her school. In the wake of the strike, schools have announced the extension of the school day to make the teachers pay for the lost hours from the walkout. "When they added an extra hour at the end of our days for the rest of the year—normal schools get out at 4 p.m., but my school, a late start, we don't get out till 5 p.m., and we teachers have to stay until 5:20 p.m. So I'm at work from 7:30 a.m. for meetings until 5:20 p.m."

Randy, an Oklahoma school teacher, made the following statement to the WSWs: "I would say this to the Arizona teachers. Don't trust the union. The OEA came in with all these megaphones and stages and port-a-pottys to try to buy the teachers. Many teachers thought these people were on our side."

"The day before they called the strike off, teachers cornered Alicia Priest outside her office. She was on video saying the strike was not even close to being over, that there was a long fight ahead of us. She was

reassuring people that we were not giving in. This was less than 24 hours before the strike was called off.

"That shows they absolutely cannot be trusted. It seems like they knew how long they would be out for, and that the work with the legislators would not achieve what they were asking."

Randy called on teachers in Arizona to "create their own coalition." He continued: "Do not let the union speak for you, because the union will call the strike off. They will settle for nothing. It's the job of the union to keep workers off strike. The union has a vested interest in this situation. If they can keep workers off strike, they can tell the superintendents and employers, 'Look at all the strikes we've stopped.'"

"One of the other things is the desperate need to connect teachers across state lines," he said. "We need to see what we can do. If we can get a few states to go on strike simultaneously, others will follow. That's when we'll be able to call the shots. The power is with us, nothing happens without the workers. Bringing the country to a halt is gonna send a message."



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