Teachers stage protests in lead-up to Arizona, Colorado walkouts this week

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Thousands of teachers across Arizona participated in "walk-in" protests yesterday and today, lining up outside schools with students and parents before walking in together, in the lead-up to this Thursday's statewide walkout. The walkout will coincide with strikes by teachers in Colorado, which have forced school districts to close on Thursday and Friday.

In the wake of this year's nine- and ten-day walkouts by educators in Oklahoma and West Virginia, which were only ended due to the betrayals of the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), there is enormous support among teachers for a united struggle in defense of the right to public education.

Arizona teachers have rejected the proposal by Republican Governor Doug Ducey for a 20 percent wage rise, staged over three years, which would do nothing for other school employees, or resolve the systematic cuts to the education budget over the past decade by more than $1 billion. The raise would also be funded through brutal cuts to programs for people with developmental disabilities, state universities and hospitals, and Medicaid for low-income adults and children.

Arizona educators are among the lowest-paid in the country, many of them working one or two extra jobs, and pay anywhere from $500 to $2,000 per year out of pocket for school supplies for their students.

While the Arizona Education Association, the state affiliate of the NEA, has called for a walkout only on Thursday, a number of school districts have already been forced to announce they will close on Friday, and some on Monday, due to the large number of teachers who have already declared they will not be coming to work. Phoenix United High School District has signaled it will be forced to close until Monday. Judy, an Arizona teacher, told the WSWS that the teachers at her school will not be returning before the weekend.

From the outset, the strike has been driven by rank-and-file teachers, tens of thousands of whom joined a Facebook page, Arizona Educators United, initiated by teachers, in support of strike action. The administrators of the page, however, have no independence from the union, and appear alongside union officials in press conferences.

The AEA is working to turn the walkout into a "lobbying" day at the capital and to shut down any broader strike action by channeling teachers' opposition behind the election of Democrats in the November elections. This was the means by which the unions in Oklahoma and West Virginia shut down teacher strikes, sending educators back to work without meeting any of their main demands.

A video released by Stephanie Parra, the AEA's government relations director, on Sunday, declared, "until we have the right governance in our state, we have got to be willing to take matters into our own hands. It's going to be up to us to go to voters ourselves and ask them to invest in our schools."

Above all, the unions are working to prevent the expanding wave of teachers' strikes from linking up across states into a nationwide strike.

While the unions and the corporate media have presented the ongoing wave of teachers' strikes as part of a "red state rebellion" against Republican governors and state legislatures, the teachers in Colorado are confronting no less determined enemies in Democratic governor John Hickenlooper and the state legislature, where both major parties control a majority in one of the two houses.

The role of the unions in isolating teachers and partnering with state governments was displayed in the

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state's capital, Denver, where the unions reached an agreement with the school district last month to avert a walkout that would have taken place in the midst of the strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma.

The Colorado Education Association had previously authorized strike action in Denver for midnight on March 15 upon the expiration of a pay-for-performance agreement with the school district. At the last minute, the union proposed that the hated merit pay scheme, which scapegoats teachers for the crisis of public education produced by cuts to funding and seeks to narrow the school curriculum by forcing them to teach "to the test," be extended for a year, in order to prevent a walkout that would have risked triggering a statewide strike.

Union officials in other states across the country, including in Kentucky, Florida, North Carolina, Iowa and elsewhere, have issued statements opposing strike action and warning that they are standing atop a social powder keg.

The latest was Teresa Meredith, the president of the Indiana State Teachers Association, who told the *Tribune Star* on April 21, "I think teachers are growing restless across the country and they just have reached a boiling point," adding that there was "a growing unrest in our state." Meredith admitted that "members are calling almost every day or emailing almost every day. They are asking, 'Why aren't we marching?' or responding in other ways."

She declared that the union would not be calling any strike action because the state legislature is not currently in session. "I have to find the right path to lead them on," she said.

Discussions are taking place between teachers across different states, including via social media, in opposition to the union's efforts to shut down the strikes. Several teachers from Oklahoma and West Virginia have posted comments on the Arizona Educators United Facebook page, warning Arizona teachers not to trust the unions.

Carey, an Oklahoma teacher, wrote, "Probably the two most important points to take away so far from Oklahoma is that your union will buckle to the pressure at some point and let you down, and leverage is your most valuable asset." He noted that the unions had decided to hold the walkout in Arizona after state testing occurred, thus limiting the damage to the government of any walkout. Abish, an Arizona teacher, commented in response, "I do NOT like how the union has basically taken this over. They DO NOT speak for me."

A poll released yesterday conducted by Associated Press and the NORC Center for Research revealed the overwhelming support for the teachers' struggles in the working class across the US. Of those polled, 78 percent believed that teachers are not paid enough, while only 15 percent believed they were paid the right amount, and 6 percent that they are overpaid. This is in spite of the efforts by Democrats and Republicans for more than three decades to scapegoat teachers for the crisis of public education.

The widespread support in the working class for the teachers' struggle points to the real allies of educators. The mobilization of this support requires the formation of new organizations, rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions in every school, to take the struggle out of the hands of the strike-breaking unions, and to turn out to teachers and workers throughout the country in a common struggle to defend the right to high-quality public education.

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