

The teachers' struggle spreads to Arizona and Colorado

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The resistance movement of teachers in the United States is entering a new stage.

On Thursday, nearly 60,000 educators in Arizona are scheduled to launch the first statewide teachers' strike in the history of that southwestern state. They are demanding a 20 percent raise and the restoration of more than \$1 billion in school funding cuts over the last decade.

On Friday, thousands of teachers in neighboring Colorado are expected to converge on the state capitol in Denver to demand improved wages and pensions.

On Tuesday, 3,000 teaching and research assistants began a four-day strike at Columbia University in New York City.

The wave of teachers' strikes, which began in West Virginia and Oklahoma over the last two months, is an expression of an objective process with far-reaching consequences. As the Trump administration and its opponents in the ruling class remain locked in a ferocious conflict centered on issues of foreign policy and war, an altogether different conflict has emerged between the working class and the entire capitalist ruling elite.

The teachers' revolt in the US is part of an international resurgence of the class struggle that has drawn in educators and public- and private-sector workers across Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia and Australia.

The decades-long period in which the unions could suppress the class struggle—giving the ruling class a free hand to drive down the social position of the working class and transfer wealth to the corporate and financial oligarchy—is coming to an end. The teachers' strikes are the precursors of immense class battles on the horizon.

This makes it all the more urgent that teachers and the entire working class carefully review the lessons of the struggle up to this point.

First, as the *World Socialist Web Site* anticipated and warned, the development of the class struggle has placed workers in direct opposition to the pro-capitalist and corporatist syndicates that call themselves trade unions. The struggles of teachers were initiated by rank-and-file workers, not the unions. Far from leading the resistance, the National

Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state affiliates have functioned as strikebreakers on behalf of the corporate and political establishment.

In both West Virginia and Oklahoma, the unions proceeded from the same playbook. First they opposed teachers going on strike, and then, when they were not able to stop it, they worked systematically to isolate, smother and crush the strikes. As one Oklahoma teacher observed, "The OEA [Oklahoma Education Association] ran out in front of our train, which was gaining momentum, and started acting like they were leading the train, and then said they were stopping the train."

In both states, the union executives put into practice the principle they spelled out in their argument to the US Supreme Court in the case of *Janus v. AFSCME*, which threatens to ban contracts requiring that public employees who choose not to join the union nevertheless pay so-called agency or union security fees to the union bureaucrats.

"Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes," the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) lawyer declared. AFT President Randi Weingarten went even further in comments to the *Washington Post* when she warned the Supreme Court justices that the type of "activism and political action" seen among West Virginia teachers "will be multiplied and magnified across the country" if the financial stability of the unions is further weakened.

The NEA and AFT are playing the same role in Arizona, Colorado and other states. Whatever meager pay increases teachers receive will be paid for by slashing other essential services and imposing regressive taxes on workers, while leaving the cash hoards of the gas, coal and oil industries unscathed.

The unions are, above all, determined to prevent the unification of the struggles of teachers in different states, and the struggle of teachers with those of other sections of the working class.

Second, the strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma

revealed the role of auxiliary agents of the unions, including those running nominally independent Facebook groups, which won support from teachers who were initially able to express through them their opposition to poverty wages and school cuts and their support for strike action. However, the individuals leading “Oklahoma Teachers United” and “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout—The Time is Now!”, like those who currently lead Arizona Educators United (AEU), handed control of the movement to the unions and the Democratic Party.

The leader of OTU, who has close connections to the International Socialist Organization (ISO), censored the WSWs on the reactionary grounds that the “struggle for public education is not political.” This was aimed at reinforcing the politics of the Democratic Party and cordoning teachers off from socialist politics, which insists that workers must break the stranglehold of the two corporate-controlled parties and build a politically independent movement of the working class against the banks and big business.

After ignoring workers in “red states” like West Virginia and Oklahoma, whom they denounced as racist Trump supporters, the ISO, the Democratic Socialists of America and similar upper-middle-class groups around the Democratic Party are now doing everything they can to reassert the control of the unions over the working class.

The teachers’ strikes, the ISO’s *Socialist Worker* website recently wrote, “point toward a strategy for public-sector unions to survive if the *Janus* Supreme Court decision comes down as expected.” That is, they hope that the struggle of teachers, which has developed in opposition to the unions, can be redirected to bolster the unions’ authority.

Third, the struggle of teachers and the entire working class brings them into direct conflict with the Democratic and Republican parties and the entire state apparatus, which represents the interests of the ruling class. At every rally, union bureaucrats shout ad nauseam the stupidest of all slogans, “Remember in November.” That is, teachers should shut down their struggle and take up an electoral campaign for the Democratic Party.

The line of the unions and their political allies is that the crisis of public education is entirely the fault of the Republicans. This position was summed up Tuesday by *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, who claimed that the “war on education, and in particular a war on school teachers,” is being waged solely by right-wing Republicans. While acknowledging that teachers’ wages have been falling since the mid-1990s, Krugman left out the fact that the war against teachers has conducted no less ruthlessly by Democratic governors and presidents, from Clinton to Obama.

While the Republicans have sought to undermine the unions, the Democrats have relied on the NEA, AFT and other unions to suppress strikes and implement their corporate-driven “school reform” agenda, including merit pay and charter schools. The NEA and AFT are constituent parts of the Democratic Party, with AFT President Weingarten (annual income, \$500,000) serving on the Democratic National Committee.

From these lessons, the following tasks emerge. First, teachers and all workers require independent and democratic organizations of struggle: rank-and-file committees that are completely independent of the unions. These committees will provide a means for linking up struggles across state and national lines and mobilizing teachers throughout the US and internationally in a common movement.

The struggle of teachers requires not only the moral support of workers in other industries—including autoworkers, telecommunication workers, health care workers, service workers and public-sector workers—but their active participation. Every section of the working class faces the same issues and the same enemies. The organization of factory and workplace committees is the prerequisite for the preparation of a general strike.

Second, the eruption of the class struggle must be developed into a conscious political movement against the capitalist system and its state. As teachers are coming to realize, any effort to implement desperately needed social reforms requires the expropriation of the fortunes of the capitalist oligarchy and a frontal assault on the dictatorship of the banks and giant corporations. Such measures are impossible, however, so long as the capitalist class holds state power.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality seek to broaden support for the teachers among all sections of the working class, raise the class consciousness of workers, clarify the political issues raised by the struggle, and explain the connection between the teachers’ strikes and the struggle against capitalism and for socialism in the United States and internationally.



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