

Arizona strike biggest yet in teachers' revolt in US

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Arizona teachers walked out Thursday in the first statewide teachers strike in the history of the southwestern US state. A massive crowd of 75,000 educators and their supporters marched and rallied, voicing their demands for better teacher pay and more funding for schools. The same day, several thousand teachers in neighboring Colorado walked out in some of the largest school districts and rallied at the state capitol in advance of a walkout by teachers in Denver and other cities on Friday.

The Arizona march began at Chase field in Phoenix and proceeded two miles to a rally outside the state capitol where legislators were in session. Teachers, support staff and site administrators were joined by other workers in a show of solidarity. Many educators felt exhilarated for finally standing up to fight for public education. One teacher from Rio Rico told WSWS reporters "When conversations about the strike started happening we were very for the message, it felt overdue."

By noon, when the end of the march was reaching the capitol, the state senate arrogantly adjourned until Monday ensuring that no funding proposals would be heard or voted.

Protest organizers, which included the Facebook group Arizona Educators United in conjunction with the Arizona Education Association (AEA), hoped to limit the action to an impotent lobbying of state legislators. With the Senate adjourning, the protest leaders had nothing further to propose to the mass of striking teachers so they called off the rally three hours early at 1:30 p.m., citing excessive heat as the justification. Noah Karvelis, the administrator of the AEU Facebook page, called for the protest to resume Friday, saying, "What I think we're going to do is come down here and say, 'We're here, where are you?'"

The walkout is the biggest yet in a wave of militant struggles to defend public education, with an estimated 840,000 students in Arizona affected. As in West Virginia and Oklahoma, the movement was initiated by rank-and-

file teachers, using social media, not the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) or their state affiliates. Since betraying the strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma, the NEA and AFT have been doing everything in their power to prevent teacher rebellions from spreading across the country.

Arizona educators have confronted some of the worst pay cuts and budget shortfalls in the nation. After the economic crisis of 2008, Arizona per-pupil funding was cut more than in any other state, falling 36.6 percent. Teacher pay in Arizona since 2000 has dropped more than 10 percent when adjusted for inflation. Current salaries are comparable to what teachers made nearly 40 years ago, in 1980.

Governor Doug Ducey sought to stave off the strike by proposing a 20 percent pay raise. Teachers rejected this empty promise because there was no proposal to fund the pay raise, meaning it would likely come from cuts to essential services, and it did nothing to address chronic school underfunding.

Teachers turned out *en masse* despite efforts by politicians to threaten them. On Monday, Diane Douglas, the state's superintendent of public education, said in an interview with CBS5: "Striking in Arizona is illegal... it's a shame that it's come to this... to say that I don't support teachers in my opinion is not fair. I absolutely do, but I cannot and will not support illegal activities on the part of our teachers." She then listed potential consequences, including teachers losing their certification or getting letters of censure on their employment record.

Douglas' attack on the teachers' right to strike was joined by Kelly Townsend, the State Assembly's Republican majority whip. On Tuesday, Townsend asked any teachers who felt intimidated into participating in the walkout to contact her. Then she announced that she was organizing a class action lawsuit for anyone negatively impacted by "harm that comes to them by the teacher

walkout.”

Similar threats were leveled against Colorado teachers, where two Republican state senators proposed new legislation that would punish striking teachers with fines, jail time and immediate job loss. Despite these official efforts at intimidation, educators registered their opposition.

The unions and state Democrats have sought to explain the wave of teacher strikes as a battle against “Red State” Republicans. However, President Obama and Democratic-controlled governments in states like New York and California have waged the war against public education and school teachers just as ruthlessly as their Republican counterparts.

In Colorado, the governor is a Democrat and the state House of Representatives is controlled by the Democratic Party. Even though the Democrats have controlled the state government for most of the last decade, teachers are 46th in pay in the nation and Colorado consistently ranks in the bottom tier of school funding in the nation, having lost \$6.6 billion since 2009.

In order to carry their struggle forward, teachers in Arizona and Colorado must learn the lessons of the West Virginia and Oklahoma strikes. In each case, the unions sought to isolate the struggle and redirect it behind voting for Democrats in the mid-term elections.

The unions see it as their task to ensure “labor peace.” In a comment to the *Washington Post*, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten (\$500,000/year salary), wrote that if the unions are weakened struggles like that in West Virginia “will be multiplied and magnified across the country.”

It is no coincidence that the teachers’ struggle has broken out first in states where the unions have less of a stranglehold. In Arizona, a state with over 50,000 teachers, the Arizona Education Association has fewer than 20,000 members.

In West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states, teachers have flocked to Facebook groups to voice their opposition and demand statewide action. However, the leaders of these groups have ceded control of the movement to the unions, while echoing the unions’ false claims that impotent appeals to the governors and state legislatures will address teachers’ demands. Arizona Educators United leader Noah Karvelis has spoken side by side with NEA President Lily Garcia (\$348,000/year salary) and AEA President Joe Thomas and praised the union for “working with us.”

If the struggle is left in the hands of the unions, it will

be betrayed, like the West Virginia and Oklahoma strikes. In those states, the unions cut deals with state Republicans and Democrats that ignored teachers’ demands for livable wages and health care benefits and the restoration of years of budget cuts. Whatever meager raises were granted will be paid for through a combination of cuts to other state programs and regressive taxes that will hit the working class the hardest. Meanwhile, the giant energy, financial and other corporate interests, which are sitting on an estimated cash hoard of \$1.8 trillion nationally, got away unscathed.

Teachers are beginning to break organizationally with the corporate-controlled unions, but they must also break with the unions’ reactionary political outlook, which subordinates the working class to the Democratic Party and the economic dictatorship of the corporate and financial elite.

To take the struggle forward, teachers must make a decisive break with the unions by electing rank-and-file committees in every school and community. Rather than appealing to Democrats and Republicans, who speak for a different class, democratically controlled committees will reach out to every section of workers, public- and private-sector, who face the same attacks on their jobs, living standards and essential services.

At the same time, these committees will reach out across state lines to coordinate the battle and fight for a nationwide teachers’ strike as part of the preparation of a general strike by all workers to defend high-quality public education and all the social rights of the working class. This must be combined with the fight to build a socialist movement of the working class to take political power and implement a program, including public ownership and democratic control of the corporations and banks, to end social inequality and meet social needs.



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