

Arizona teachers rally for second day, further walkout expected Monday

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Arizona teachers continued the first statewide teachers strike on Friday, filling the capitol plaza. Amidst widespread support for an expanded struggle, including mass protests in Colorado, the unions are doing everything they can to shut the strike down as quickly as possible.

The number of protesters was down to less than 10,000 Friday, from the 75,000 who marched on Thursday, as the Arizona Education Association did nothing to mobilize teachers. The AEA and the union-aligned Arizona Educators United Facebook page called the rally off after only two hours, telling teachers to return Monday when the state legislature resumes its session.

The Senate had adjourned Thursday at noon in a clear statement that it had no intention of addressing the teachers' demands. The unions ended Thursday's rally shortly thereafter.

The unions are above all determined to prevent the unification of the struggles of teachers in Arizona and Colorado, as this would threaten to develop into a much broader movement that would challenge the Democratic and Republican parties. Republicans control the state government in Arizona, while Democrats control it in Colorado. As Will, an Arizona special education teacher, told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters: "The Democrats are even worse than the Republicans. They've both been cutting education."

On Friday, close to 10,000 teachers from Colorado's largest metropolitan areas showed up at the state capitol to protest a lack of school funding, the nation's lowest pay for teachers, and the decrepit state of school infrastructure. The protests involved teachers from the state's 10 largest school districts, with about 500,000 students affected by school shutdowns due to the walkouts.

In Arizona, the AEA has outlined a plan to call the strike off after Monday and focus teacher energy on a ballot initiative to direct a new state income tax towards education.

AEA President Joe Thomas addressed the crowd, stating pathetically: "We have to work with [legislators] over the weekend. We have to work with them on Monday, when they have to be here and they don't get to adjourn for the week... We have to push them as hard as we can to get them to listen to us on Monday and give them one more remedial opportunity to listen and act."

In the afternoon, Republican Governor Doug Ducey tweeted that he had reached a deal with state legislators for a 20 percent raise with no new taxes. His proposal ostensibly includes \$100 million more in school funding, which rises to \$371 million over five years, less than half of the funding deficit teachers are demanding be bridged.

Despite touring news stations to promote his plan, however, he presented no details on where the money will come from. If a plan even exists, the funding will certainly not come from increases in business taxes, but rather will be paid for through cuts to programs that benefit the working class.

Throughout the teachers struggle, Ducey has premised a pay raise on hopes that the economy will improve, but legislators have demanded explicit funding sources. Without new taxes, that money would inevitably come from other social services.

Thomas issued a joint response with Noah Karvelis, the administrator of the Arizona Educators United Facebook page, where initial protests were organized, stating: "We have no bill. We have no deal. The devil is in the details." The AEA has not yet issued a clear statement about planned protests for Monday, other

than Thomas's declaration in the morning that the union would direct the teachers' efforts to campaigning for a funding ballot initiative.

The same day, a union official filed paperwork for an initiative to raise state taxes on incomes over \$250,000. To get on the ballot, a petition with over 150,000 signatures needs to be submitted by July 5. The union hopes by this measure to defuse the teachers strike and avoid a political fight with the state government.

Without a political fight against the bipartisan drive to dismantle public education, school funding remains at the whim of hostile politicians.

A case in point are recent comments by an Oklahoma state senator on teacher pay. In order to stave off a teachers strike, legislators in that state approved a \$6,100 pay increase, far short of the \$10,000 teachers demanded. The day the Oklahoma Education Association called off the ensuing 10-day strike without any new gains, legislators began talking of rescinding the pay raise.

State Senator Greg McCortney told a crowd: "I absolutely believe we're not going to give your school the money to pay for that pay raise. So, I think... we will have to repeal the increase in the minimum salary schedule."

The struggle of Arizona teachers hangs in the balance. The AEA president has clearly stated that after Monday he will divert the teachers' struggle into a dead-end ballot initiative and campaigning for Democrats in November. The AEA has already endorsed Democrat David Garcia for governor.

If the struggle is left in the hands of the unions and the AEU, it will be betrayed, like the West Virginia and Oklahoma strikes.

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.



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