

As Arizona teachers strike enters third day, unions seek to shut down walkout

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The strike by tens of thousands of Arizona educators, the largest yet in a series of teacher struggles across the United States over the last two months, is in danger of being shut down by the unions. The Arizona Education Association (AEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), working in conjunction with the Facebook group Arizona Educators United, are preparing to end the walkout on the basis of a rotten agreement with legislators that resolves nothing.

An estimated 57,000 teachers walked out last Thursday to demand a 20 percent raise for teachers, substantial pay hikes for support staff and the restoration of the \$1 billion in school cuts in order lower class sizes and fund school supplies. While Phoenix, Tucson and other school districts will remain closed today, the unions are preparing to use the expected passage of another bogus funding proposal and the reopening of schools in Scottsdale and other districts to call the strike off as early as Tuesday.

The arrival today of AFT President Randi Weingarten is meant to be the kiss of death to the strike. Weingarten, whose salary is \$497,300, is not in Arizona to unify teachers with their counterparts in other states. On the contrary, Weingarten and National Education Secretary Lily Eskelsen Garcia (salary \$348,000) have spent the last two months jetting from their Washington, DC offices to West Virginia, Oklahoma and other states to prevent a unified struggle by teachers across state boundaries.

Arizona Governor Doug Ducey announced on Friday a deal promising a 20 percent pay increase for educators and a minor increase in school funding, which would supposedly be financed based on unrealistic projections of economic growth. In other words—empty promises. The AEA, for its part, has indicated it will shut down the strike on Tuesday even if this cynical gesture is not passed by the legislature.

As the unions move to shut down the Arizona strike, the

Colorado Education Association quickly ended sickouts and other protests by tens of thousands of teachers that closed schools across the state. At a Denver rally Friday, the unions invited Democrats, including multimillionaire Governor John Hickenlooper and gubernatorial candidate Cary Kennedy, on stage although both back charter schools. Under the Democratic-controlled state government, Colorado teachers have fallen to near bottom in pay, and the state has cut \$6.6 billion from school funding since 2008.

If Arizona and Colorado teachers are to avoid the same outcome as in West Virginia and Oklahoma, where the unions sold out the strikes, teachers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions and fight for a nationwide strike of teachers to beat back the bipartisan assault on public education. The unions are not workers' organizations, but corporatist adjuncts of the state and the corporations, which work to divide workers and suppress the class struggle.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers to elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community to fan out to every workplace—public and private sector—to build support in every section of the working class and to coordinate this struggle with educators across all 50 states. A campaign should be initiated to prepare a general strike to demand full funding for public education and secure decent living standards, guaranteed health care and retirement security for all workers.

Weingarten is scheduled to appear at a rally in Phoenix along with various state Democrats. The main purpose of this rally is to convince Arizona teachers that any collective struggle is hopeless because of the Republicans, and that the best teachers can do is to vote for Democrats in November.

This is a self-serving lie. Weingarten is a member of the Democratic National Committee and a major operative of this big-business party, which is seeking to transform the

teachers' revolt into a campaign to elect Democrats in the 2018 elections. But the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are enemies of public education and schoolteachers. While the two big-business parties find limitless resources for Wall Street, criminal wars and corporate tax cuts, they insist there is no money for teachers' salaries and public education.

Democratic-controlled states like California, New York and Colorado have slashed the jobs of tens of thousands of school employees, imposed merit pay and other corporate-backed "school reform" schemes and sharply increased the number of for-profit charter schools.

Under the Obama administration, the AFT and NEA adopted the slogan "school reform with us, not without us," blocking any resistance by teachers to budget cuts, school closings and punitive evaluation schemes. In exchange, the unions were rewarded with the collection of union dues from charter school teachers and seats on various government boards and task forces to oversee "teacher effectiveness" and cuts to health care and pension benefits.

The strike in Arizona, like the previous walkouts in West Virginia and Oklahoma, was not initiated by the unions, but rank-and-file teachers, including large numbers of nonunion educators, who used social media to demand statewide strikes. After opposing strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma, the AFT and the NEA pretended to support the struggle only to shut down the walkouts when state officials predictably refused to budge.

Having learned their lesson from these previous strikes, the unions moved very quickly to take control of the Facebook page Arizona Educators United (AEU) to prevent the struggle from breaking out of their grip.

According to a report in *Jacobin* magazine supporting the union operation, "Various AEU leaders and site liaisons are also local AEA union activists," and "union president Joe Thomas and vice-president Marisol Garcia have backed the movement just as enthusiastically." The "union's help," AEU leader Noah Karvelis said, "has been invaluable. It's incredible how AEA leaders have worked with us: they've let us retain our position up in front of the movement, which is 100 percent rank-and-file led. This has been an incredibly powerful collaboration—I think it's a great model for other states, particularly those with 'right-to-work' restrictions."

In other words, the AEU is assisting the union to recruit new members. But far from "helping" teachers, the unions have functioned as strikebreakers and scab organizations. As it welcomes the "support" of the AEA,

the AEU has censored articles from the *World Socialist Web Site* and the comments of teachers from Oklahoma warning Arizona teachers about the treachery of the AFT and NEA.

The formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees by teachers and all sections of the working class must be connected to the building of a socialist political leadership in the working class. The actions of the unions are determined above all by their absolute support for the capitalist system and their hostility to a political movement of the working class to take power in its own hands.

Teachers are beginning to break the organizational stranglehold of the unions. But they must consciously reject the political program of the unions, which subordinates the working class to the capitalist two-party system and dictatorship of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

By demanding increased funding for public education teachers are implicitly challenging the unequal distribution of wealth and the capitalist system, which enriches the few at the expense of the many. Just three billionaires—Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Microsoft's Bill Gates and investor Warren Buffett—have the same amount of wealth as the bottom 160 million people in America.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to organize the working class into a political movement to overturn the capitalist system and reorganize social and economic life on a global scale to meet urgent social needs, including the right to public education, high-paying jobs and quality health care for all.

Only if workers take the reins of power in their own hands will it be possible to transform the giant corporations into publicly owned enterprises, seize the ill-gotten gains of the super-rich, and allocate trillions of dollars to eliminate poverty and raise the material and cultural level of society as a whole.

The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* will do everything possible to mobilize educators across the US and internationally to broaden this fight. We urge teachers and students to study the history and program of the SEP and join the fight to build a new revolutionary leadership in the working class.



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