

Union betrays Arizona teachers strike, backs Republican state budget

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4 May 2018

Early Thursday morning, the Arizona state legislature passed the budget proposal of Republican Governor Doug Ducey, which was promptly signed into law. Arizona Education Association (AEA) and its front group, Arizona Educators United (AEU), endorsed the budget on Tuesday and called for an end to the walkout. Districts across the state sent out notices that classes are to resume Friday.

The settlement is a miserable betrayal of teachers who courageously struck for six days, in defiance of anti-strike laws and the deliberate isolation of their walkout by the national teacher unions and state unions in Arizona. The budget is virtually unchanged from the proposal teachers rejected when they began their strike April 26. It includes money to give some teachers raises but not enough for the promised 20 percent over the next three years.

Teachers without a homeroom class, like resource teachers or reading coaches, are entirely left out of these raises. Also excluded are tens of thousands of support staff like school bus drivers, instructional aides, custodians and cafeteria workers, many of whom are paid close to minimum wage.

Like the statewide strikes that preceded it in West Virginia and Oklahoma, the walkout in Arizona was initiated by rank-and-file teachers, not the unions, which opposed any strike action from the beginning. The Arizona teacher unions announced the end of the walkout the day after a visit from American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, who along with her counterpart in the National Education Association, Lily Eskelsen Garcia, have been combing the country to stamp out teachers' strikes and prevent them from coalescing into a nation-wide movement.

The Arizona walkout was shut down as teachers and paraprofessionals in Pueblo, Colorado have carried out sickouts and are threatening to go on strike Monday, after unions in Colorado shut down statewide protests a week ago. Protests and demands for strike action are spreading

through other states, including the Carolinas, Florida and Kentucky.

The Arizona budget meets none of the initial demands of teachers and resolves none of the underlying problems in public education that drove teachers to strike. The deal provides only \$400 million in additional school funding over the next five years, barely more than a third of the \$1.1 billion that has been cut over the last decade. Teacher raises, which are not even guaranteed, will still leave educators near the bottom in the country for salaries.

The president of the Arizona Education Association, Joe Thomas, used typical double-talk to try to cover up this naked sellout. "We will return to our schools, classrooms, and students knowing that we have achieved something truly historic. We should take pride in what we have accomplished, and in the movement that we have created together." Thomas went on to praise Democratic legislators who postured as defenders of teachers even though they are complicit in the attack on public education.

A particularly pernicious role was played by the leaders of the ostensibly "grassroots" organization, Arizona Educators United, a Facebook group, which was established with the backing of the AEA and whose chief function was to maintain the grip of the union and the Democratic Party over teachers and smother the movement.

AEU leader Noah Karvelis said, "We brought a change that we never thought we could in Arizona... We won our battle, now it's time to win the war." Rebecca Garelli of the AEU, who has close connections to the Labor Notes publication and pseudo-left organizations, said, "The K-12 budget was passed and signed, so that means our job is done, and we are going to return to our classes tomorrow."

On Thursday morning, the AEA/AEU held a "solidarity

rally,” which was attended by a decidedly smaller number of teachers. AEA and AEU officials had the nerve to urge teachers to join their rotten organization, which had just betrayed them. At the same time the repeated the idiotic slogan “remember in November” to urge teachers to vote for Democrats.

In order to silence opposition, the AEU quickly censored its Facebook page, deleting posts and banning teachers critical of the AEA. However, teachers did post their opposition to the Arizona Educators Rank-and-File Committee Facebook page, initiated by the World Socialist Web Site *Teacher Newsletter*.

“As a liaison, who has exerted a tremendous amount of time and energy away from my family through this whole experience, I felt let down and betrayed,” Sarah, a Phoenix area teacher commented.

“Up to a couple of days ago, things were done on a democratic process—and I felt empowered, like I had a voice. Then, all of a sudden, we go from ‘We won’t stop until we win’ to ‘when the budget passes, we will return to the classroom.’ No vote. No questions posed to the 75,000 people who were behind this movement,” she wrote.

“All measures of the ballot,” Sarah continued, “still hadn’t passed—particularly the one tied to vouchers—and it was already decided for us at the rally this morning that we were to end the strike. I felt like I was in the twilight zone today amongst the crowd of people.”

Another teacher, Kurt, expressed his dissatisfaction: “I’m frustrated with how this continues to play out. This isn’t over, but we didn’t win the battle we could for our kids.” A teacher from Oklahoma added, “This is exactly what happened in Oklahoma. The union is doing just like it did in OK. Disgusting.”

These betrayals underscore the need for teachers to decisively break from these corrupt organization and elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community to prepare the next round of struggle in Arizona and around the country. This includes linking up with teachers across the US and internationally, fighting to win the active support of every section of workers, and prepare a nationwide strike to fight for the right to high-quality public education and livable wages for all workers.

The ongoing struggle of teachers underscores the irreconcilable class conflict, which is at the heart of this battle. By insisting that social needs, including fully funded public schools and livable wages, take priority, educators are implicitly challenging the whole economic and political system of capitalism, which subordinates

everything to ever-greater enrichment of a financial oligarchy.

The bipartisan assault on public education accelerated sharply after the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent bailout of the Wall Street banks. While limitless resources were made available to re-inflate the stock market bubble, the loss of tax revenue and growing indebtedness of states and school districts was used by both big business parties to launch a war against public education and school teachers.

This took the direct methods of cutting school budgets while giving tax cuts to corporations. Other times, under the guise of “education reform,” the state and local politicians have funneled money to charter and private schools to open the highly lucrative “education market” to for profit education businesses, hedge funds and vulture capitalists.

The Democratic administration of Bill Clinton in the 1990s oversaw the creation of the first 1,700 charter schools. This was expanded by Republican George Bush and Democrat Barack Obama under their No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top programs. During Obama’s first term, more than 300,000 public school teachers and staff were fired alongside a doubling of charter schools.

This assault is being accelerated under Trump and his secretary of education, billionaire heiress Betsy DeVos, who told a crowd of edu-business investors and speculators last year that she was determined to “get the federal government out of the way so you can do your job.”

The conditions that drove Arizona teachers to strike continue to deepen across the whole country and the world. The most critical question is to draw lessons from this experience about the political forces arrayed against teachers, including the Democrats, the Republicans and the unions. New genuinely rank-and-file controlled organizations are needed to expand this struggle, which must be linked up to the building of a politically independent movement of the working class whose aim is to end the dictatorship of the super-rich and fight for workers’ power and socialism.



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