

After union betrayal in Arizona, teacher militancy continues to build across US

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Tens of thousands of US teachers have struck and protested across many states so far this year, defying state anti-strike laws and their own unions. The eruption of statewide strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona has exposed the universal and stark nature of the crisis facing the nation's 3.1 million teachers and some 50 million elementary and secondary students and their parents.

These events have also revealed the anti-working-class character of the unions, which have worked hand-in-glove with both big business parties to suppress opposition to austerity and corporate-backed "school reform." Where the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state affiliates have been unable to prevent strikes, they have worked quickly to smother them before they spread to other states and coalesced into a nationwide strike.

Last week, the Arizona Education Association (AEA) shut down the strike by nearly 60,000 teachers and backed the Republican governor's budget that ignored teachers' main demands for significant wage improvements for themselves and other school employees, as well as the restoration of more than \$1 billion in school funding cuts over the last decade. This followed same pattern as the union betrayals in West Virginia and Oklahoma.

The eruption of protest has emerged after decades of a well-funded war against public education by the for-profit education industry and Wall Street and implemented by Democrats and Republicans at every level of government. They have been accompanied by the handouts of trillions of dollars of tax cuts to the oil and gas industries, General Motors, Amazon and other corporate interests.

While these policies are epitomized by billionaire heiress and current Education Secretary Betsy DeVos who has made the destruction of public schools her life's work, they entirely predate her appointment. Charter schools and other forms of school privatization were promoted in the 1990s by former Democratic President Bill Clinton, followed by Republican George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind, which pushed charters as a remedy for schools failing national tests. But it was the administration of Democrat Barack Obama, a supporter of the hedge fund group Democrats for Education Reform and of Wall Street more generally, which implemented the most far-reaching attacks.

American teachers currently earn about 20 percent less than others with a college degree, a wage gap that increases into mid-career. In addition, US educators spend on average \$600 of their own money every year on basic supplies for their classroom. Nearly all teachers, 99.5 percent, buy school supplies, with a total of two-thirds of all classroom supplies purchased—not by school districts—but by teachers, according to *Education Week*.

As child poverty has soared nationally, a staggering 91 percent of teachers also buy necessities for their students—from food and clothing to essential school supplies. These expenditures amount to more than \$3 billion dollars out of pocket from educators.

Pensions are increasingly under attack as states and districts have failed to fully fund teachers and other public-sector pensions, resulting in cuts to either monthly pension payments or retiree healthcare or the eliminating of pensions altogether. As of 2016, there was a \$1.4 trillion national deficit in state pension funds. Meanwhile, 40 percent of all teachers including those in Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Rhode Island and Texas are not eligible to collect Social Security.

This abysmal state of affairs in public education is not the result of popular sentiment. Just the opposite. There is overwhelming support for the struggles of teachers and the defense of public education. A recent poll from the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research affirms that 78 percent of Americans says teachers are underpaid, 80 percent support the recent protests and a majority support teachers' strikes. Not lack of support but only the collusion of the unions with government officials has prevented a broader struggle until now.

The sellout of the strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona has resolved nothing and there are new struggles already brewing. Here are just a few examples.

Colorado

The first Colorado teachers' strike since 1994 is set to begin today in Pueblo. Pueblo teachers and paraprofessionals have worked without a contract since August, while educators throughout the state are demanding pay raises, the preservation of the state employee retirement fund and better benefits.

More than 10,000 walked out to demonstrate at the capitol on April 26-27 over demands to rectify the \$822 million shortfall in state funding of public education. Under Governor John Hickenlooper, a Democrat, average teacher salaries in the state rank 46th in the nation. The Education Law Center called Colorado's teachers salaries worst in the nation "when compared to professionals with similar education levels." Per-pupil funding is \$2,700 below the national average.

"A janitor can make a lot more working at Starbucks," said Summit Cove Elementary School teacher Tara Dye, according to the *Denver Post*. Jessica Crawford, a second-grade teacher, said she was stunned when she found few or no school supplies last fall because the district couldn't afford them. "There were no crayons, no markers, hardly anything at all."

North Carolina

Thousands of teachers throughout North Carolina are expected to demonstrate on May 16 in a “March for Students and Rally for Respect” in Raleigh, as the state legislature begins its session. Teachers in the state earn, on average, 5 percent less than in 2008 and the state spends 12.2 percent less than it did prior to the recession. Meanwhile, \$3.5 billion has been handed out to corporate and top income earners through tax cuts, according to *The News & Observer*. Health insurance premiums cost educators an average of nearly \$10,000 a year, as drastic increases have been imposed. The state removed the cap on charter schools, putting public education under substantial additional financial pressure.

South Carolina

South Carolina teachers have called for a demonstration in Columbia on May 19 over low pay, high class sizes, excessive testing and lack of prep time. The state pays its teachers about \$6,000 a year lower than neighboring states, a pay scale ranked 45th in the nation. Per-student funding is about \$530 below its legal minimum and has been for a decade. Last year a whopping 6,700 teachers failed to return to the classroom, while the legislature now considers a desultory 1 or 2 percent cost of living adjustment for educators.

Puerto Rico

Teachers on the US territory island in the Caribbean have repeatedly struck and protested the demands by Governor Ricardo Rossello to dismantle and privatize public education in the US territory of Puerto Rico. Wall Street interests organized through a Financial Oversight Board have seized on the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria to press for a “broad education reform” including vouchers, charters and the closure of 280 schools.

Arkansas

“You go and spend tens of thousands of dollars on an education to start a career and you have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet,” said Brittani Brooks, a Library Media Specialist, to Arkansas THV11 news. The starting wage for Arkansas teachers is \$31,400; the state ranks 39th out of 50 for teacher salaries. Between 2010 and 2015, the number of new teachers has dropped 36 percent. “Classroom size is definitely a big challenge. Our schools are full, our classrooms are full and to be good at what you do there are so many responsibilities and I feel overwhelmed,” said 2nd grade teacher Lisa Harrison in the same news report. She added, “We all feel overwhelmed and we just want to be heard.”

Nevada

On April 28, Nevada teachers rallied in Las Vegas demanding funding of their step pay increases and health insurance. The Clark County School District decided to fight an arbitrator’s decision over the 2017-18 contract because, they claimed, it would cost \$13 million in 2018. Teachers lined the road holding signs “enough is enough” and shouted for their contract to be honored. Matt Nighswonger, a government teacher who organized one protest, told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* that with teachers around the country fighting, he felt Nevada teachers had to do something too.

Georgia

According to the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, education in the state has been cut for 16 straight years—including about \$1 billion each year between 2010 and 2014. This drastic assault on public education has led to the termination of about 10,000 teachers. There will be a modest increase for the 2018-19, however throughout Georgia major programs have been slashed, class sizes increased and the school year cut. Among these cuts were the reduction of state subsidies for school transportation down to a negligible 15 percent.

As a result, starting wages for school bus drivers stands at the below-poverty rate of \$18,500 in the state, 23 percent below the national average. Nearly 400 school bus drivers in DeKalb County organized a three-day sickout beginning April 19, demanding decent pay and healthcare benefits, full-time status and retirement benefits. Seven were fired for the action.

Michigan

More than a billion dollars from Michigan’s education budget was cut seven years ago, to pay for tax cuts for big businesses. The schools have never recovered. The average teacher salary in the state has fallen for six straight years. This has created a critical teacher shortage fueling high classroom sizes and lack of subject offerings across the state. There are 5,000 fewer certified teachers in the state than 14 years ago and the number of Michigan college students studying to become a teacher is down more than 50 percent, reports the Center for Michigan. Many districts, strapped for cash, are forcing teachers out of defined-benefit pension plans into 401(k)s including Detroit Public School Community District.

The unions have adamantly opposed the unification of teachers in national strike. Asked by a WSWS reporter last week about the growing calls for such a strike, AFT President Randi Weingarten said the teachers struggles were “statewide” issues and the unions wanted to turn the walkouts into “walk-ins to the voting booth” for Democrats in November.

Weingarten is a member of the Democratic National Committee and has sought to cover up the fact that the Democrats, from the Obama White House to the governors of New York, California, Colorado and other states have waged a war, just as viciously as the Republicans, against public education and schoolteachers. But they have done it in partnership with the unions.

To prepare the next round of struggle, it is essential that educators establish rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, which are tools of the government and the giant corporate interests they defend. The struggle for the social right to high quality public education requires the mobilization of every section of the working class in a political struggle against both big business parties, and to fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies. The billions of dollars now being squandered by the ruling elites on predatory wars and obscene luxury for the few must be expropriated in order to fully fund education and provide good wages, benefits and retirement to all school workers.



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