

As report shows teachers spending hundreds of dollars on school supplies

Wave of US educator walkouts hits North Carolina today

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Tens of thousands of teachers and school employees are assembling today in Raleigh, the state capital of North Carolina, for demonstrations to demand funding for crumbling school infrastructure, wages, benefits and reduced class sizes, and to oppose more than a decade of deep cuts to public education spending.

The walkout, which has already forced the closure of at least 40 of the state's 115 school districts at time of writing, is the latest in a wave of teacher strikes and demonstrations across the US, in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arizona, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and Colorado. It is part of an international upsurge of working-class class struggle in 2018, which has already seen strikes by transport workers in France, metal workers in Germany and Turkey, and a growth in strikes and protests by workers across the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

The rally follows yesterday's release of a report by the National Center for Education Statistics, based on a 2015-2016 survey, which found that 94 percent of teachers across the US were forced to spend their own money on school supplies, including chalk, to cover budget shortfalls.

The median amount spent was \$297 per year, and this number increased in areas with higher levels of poverty. For schools where three quarters or more of students qualified for government-funded lunch programs, almost one in ten teachers spent more than \$1,000 every year on basic classroom supplies.

As in previous walkouts, the initiative for the strike has come from rank-and-file teachers, not the union officials. The unions are opposed to any extended

walkout and are seeking to send teachers back to school after a single day of rallying. The North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) is promoting the rally with the hash tag #itspersonal, calling on teachers to take a personal day off school and pay \$50 for a substitute teacher if their school remains open.

The union is presenting the walkout as a run-up to the main action of voting for Democrats in the November elections. NCAE president Mark Jewell declared at a rally yesterday that "all of this will be fruitless unless we take this energy and passion to the ballot box and change those who make this policy."

The reality, however, is that the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, have overseen the assault on public education in North Carolina as throughout the US. Former Democratic governor Bev Perdue oversaw the largest cuts to school funding from 2009 to 2011, slashing more than \$1 billion from annual expenditure in current dollar terms.

Just six days ago, Colorado's Democratic-controlled House and Democratic Governor John Hickenlooper passed sweeping cuts to pensions for teachers and public employees. New teachers will now be forced to work an additional six years before retiring, while cost-of-living adjustments for pension benefits have been frozen for two years. The previous Obama administration spearheaded the assault on teachers, promoting charter schools and rewarding schools that carried out teacher layoffs.

In North Carolina, Republican Governor Patrick McCrory and the Republican-controlled legislature have continued this offensive over the past six years.

To enable school boards to carry out mass layoffs, McCrory limited the duration of all new teacher contracts to one year. Since 2009, the number of teacher support staff in the state has been cut by a third, or 7,500 workers. Over the same period, the Republican governor has repealed the estate inheritance tax and slashed the corporate tax rate from 6.9 to 4 percent.

Ann, a North Carolina teacher who retired in 2017 after 18 years, told the WSWS, “There isn’t enough money for after-school programs. There isn’t enough money for supplies.” In 2016, her class size increased from 28 to 35 students. “I taught for two years in a trailer with mold falling on the desks every day. There were 17 trailers at that school. I was sick almost all the time. Kids were sick.” She added, “It’s completely about class. The income gap just gets bigger every year. The government subsidizes the wealthiest companies.”

While there is enormous determination among teachers to fight, it is critical that they draw the lessons of the outcomes of the struggles that have occurred so far. In West Virginia, Oklahoma, Colorado and Arizona, the strikes were betrayed and shut down by the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers without achieving any of their main demands. The unions are continuing to isolate the strikes on a state-by-state basis and prevent the development a nationwide strike.

Teachers from Oklahoma and Arizona have sought to warn teachers in North Carolina to learn the lessons of these betrayals. A teacher from Arizona, Matthew, posted on the North Carolina Teachers United, a Facebook group that more than 38,000 teachers have joined in the lead-up to today’s rally, warning: “You have to watch your supposed ‘allies,’ Democratic legislators begging for votes, [and] your union who basically just wants to increase membership, stop striking and vote Democrat in November... They will sell you out quick as they can. Oklahoma and Arizona were both defeated the same way.”

In Arizona and Oklahoma, the unions relied on the services of auxiliary Facebook groups, including Arizona Educators United, Oklahoma Teachers United and Oklahoma Teachers Walkouts—The Time is Now. The administrators of these groups, while retaining formal independence from the teacher unions, served to prevent teachers from organizing independently of the unions as the latter worked to betray the strikes.

To carry forward their struggle independently and in opposition to the strikebreaking trade unions, teachers require new organizations, rank-and-file committees of teachers and school workers, which would make a powerful appeal to teachers and other workers across the United States and internationally for a common struggle.

Such a movement must be developed in direct opposition to both major parties, Democratic and Republican, which represent the banks, corporations and financial institutions that dictate policy of every government in the US and around the world. Any attempt by government officials to introduce even moderate increases in social spending, including on public education—which, in any case, they have no intention of carrying out—would be met with an immediate act of retaliation by the financial institutions.

Last week’s pension cuts in Colorado followed a statement issued by the credit rating agency Standard and Poor’s (S&P) last November warning that it would downgrade its credit rating on the state’s government bonds if the pension fund’s liabilities were not reduced. In the course of the strike by West Virginian teachers in March, government officials revealed that they had been in regular contact with both S&P and Moody’s rating agencies, which were demanding that the strike be ended.

The fight by the working class for its basic social rights—to public education, health care, a secure retirement and decent wages—is inseparable from the question of which social class determines the distribution of society’s wealth: the working class, or a tiny layer of the corporate elite. The reorganization of economic life on the basis of genuine social equality, rather than profit, means the fight for socialism. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party.



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