

Twenty thousand teachers rally in North Carolina

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An estimated 20,000 teachers rallied in North Carolina's capital of Raleigh yesterday, closing schools for two-thirds of the state's 1.5 million students to demand increased funding and wage increases.

For the sixth time in three months, tens of thousands of teachers and school employees have descended on a US state capital. The protest follows walkouts in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Colorado and Arizona. Many students, parents and other workers also joined the demonstration. The ongoing wave of teacher strikes is part of an upsurge in working class struggle across the US and internationally since the start of 2018.

Teachers who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters expressed widespread support for a united struggle in opposition to the unions' isolation of teacher strikes on a state-by-state basis. Rochelle Maignan, a pre-Kindergarten teacher from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district, said, "It's about time we all came together and started fighting."

WSWS reporters distributed hundreds of copies of the May 16 statement by the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter*, and won widespread support for their call for the preparation of a nation-wide strike to oppose the decades-long bipartisan war on public education and school workers.

Teachers also expressed anger over the union's opposition to calling a statewide strike.

"Other states are doing it, so why shouldn't we?" said Yaschia, a teacher with 20 years' experience who said she quit the union because when she needed help, "they weren't there for me."

"Teachers put up with a lot because they are dedicated to their job. But now it's time to fight," she said. "Because the elite don't want to give up their money."

This sentiment was diametrically opposed by the rally organizers in the National Education Association (NEA) and its state affiliate, the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE), who called the protest as a one-day

rally to avert a strike by allowing restive educators to let off steam.

The NCAE transformed the protest into an unofficial Democratic Party election rally. The state's governor, Roy Cooper, was invited to address the crowd and posture as an ally of teachers. NCAE president Mark Jewell introduced Cooper as a "true friend and champion of public education," and called on those present to make sure he had "some friends" elected in the state legislature in November 2018.

Between 2008 and 2015, Cooper's predecessors, Democrat Beverly Perdue and Republican Pat McCrory, slashed state school spending by 12.2 percent. Cooper, who has pledged a pittance of \$100 million in education funding and to add two percent to planned wage increases this year, demagogically asked teachers, "Go ask your legislators whether they support more corporate tax cuts or the teachers."

The Republican Party currently controls a majority in both houses of the state legislature, and under Governor McCrory it passed tax cuts benefitting the corporations and rich, including the elimination of the estate tax and a reduction in the corporate tax rate by almost three percent. Cooper's response was to propose an increase in the state's regressive sales tax.

Neither Cooper nor any of the other speakers mentioned that Democratic Governor Perdue carried out deep cuts to school funding in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. In April 2011, Perdue ordered an immediate 0.5 percent cut to teachers' wages, cutting annual education appropriations by hundreds of millions of dollars. Teachers' wages have declined by nine percent since 2009, after adjustment for inflation.

Teachers at the rally described working in school buildings with mold, vermin infestations and leaking roofs. A teacher from New Hanover County complained, "They've taken three dead rats out of my classroom."

There's more in the ceilings," she said. "Walkouts are a good idea. If that's what we have to do to draw people's attention, we will."

Chris Mayfield, a retired teacher, explained why she was protesting. "I was working 60 hours a week and it was killing me. Fifty hours in the classroom and then grading at home. What they pay you doesn't match up with what you do, and after so long your pay doesn't increase." She added, "It feels like they want to cycle people in and out and just pay less for the newer people."

The NCAE has followed the strategy used by the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers in each previous strike. While the initiative for the strikes has come from rank-and-file teachers, the unions have shut down and betrayed each struggle without meeting any of teachers' main demands, declaring that the only way for teachers to fight for improved wages and conditions is to "remember in November," i.e., vote for Democrats.

The unions' betrayals have enabled legislators to impose further attacks on educators and other workers. In West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, legislators have funded paltry wages increases through regressive taxes on workers and cuts to social programs (see: "Deals by unions to end US teacher strikes funded by regressive taxes, more budget cuts").

Last Friday, less than two weeks after the unions shut down the April 26-27 walkout by thousands of teachers in Colorado, the state's Democratic governor slashed pensions for teachers and public workers, raising the teacher retirement age by six years. Pro-Democratic media outlets, including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, which have sought to present the wave of teacher strikes as a "red-state rebellion" against Republican politicians, have remained totally silent on the pension cuts in Colorado.

In fact, the teachers' rebellions have erupted in these states precisely because this is where the unions' grip over teachers is weakest. In other states and cities, including Los Angeles, Pittsburgh and Jersey City, New Jersey, the unions have either blocked strikes altogether or shut them down after a day. Summing up the intent of the unions, AFT President Randi Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee, said, "We want to turn these walkouts into walk-ins into the voting booth" for the Democrats.

The speakers at yesterday's rally also included West Virginia Education Association president Dale Lee, who helped reach a sell-out deal with the state's billionaire

governor, Jim Justice, in March, which funded a five percent pay raise for teachers through deep cuts to Medicaid, the healthcare program for the poor, and did nothing to address the teachers' overriding concern over an underfunded healthcare insurance system.

Against the strike-breaking trade unions, the Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers to elect rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace to take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands. Instead of impotent appeals and lobbying campaigns aimed at the two corporate-controlled parties, these committees should establish lines of communication between educators across the US and internationally and fight to mobilize the broadest support in the working class for a national strike to defend and vastly improve public education.

The claim that there is no money for decent wages and benefits, textbooks and the training and hiring of new teachers and school employees is a lie. After bank bailouts and Trump's tax cuts, giant US banks and corporations, including Charlotte-based Bank of America, are sitting on a \$2.2 trillion cash hoard—nearly four times what the federal and all state governments spend on public education each year.

In the first three months of the year alone these corporations have spent \$158 billion on stock buybacks, which only benefit the richest shareholders and executives. This is enough to give a \$49,000 bonus to all 3.2 million full-time teachers in the US or increase per-pupil spending by more than \$3,000 for each of the country's 50.7 million public school students.

The fight to unify teachers and all workers in a common struggle must be connected to the development of a political movement of the working class, independent of both the Democratic and Republican parties, whose aim is the establishment of a workers' government and the reorganization of society to meet social need, rather than the profit interests of the corporate elite.



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