North Carolina teachers oppose unions' shutting down of walkout

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In the wake of Wednesday's one-day teacher walkout in North Carolina, there is immense sentiment among rank-and-file teachers for expanding their struggle and opposition to the shutting down of the walkout by the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE).

On Wednesday afternoon, teachers returning from the rally posted statements calling for a continuation of the walkout on the North Carolina Teachers United Facebook group, which more than 38,000 teachers joined in the lead-up to the walkout. A number of statements opposed the NCAE's channeling of the struggle behind the election of Democrats in the November 2018 elections.

Katherine said, "So are we really satisfied with waiting until November to hopefully vote in politicians that will listen? Are there planned and coordinated action steps already that haven't been widely communicated? A lot of my peers feel like 'well now what?' And certainly aren't satisfied with just campaigning and waiting until November to make their votes heard. What's the 'now what' piece? Is there real talk of a grass roots organized labor union, and not just whispers?"

Another teacher, Trish, posted the comment: "By November, a budget will be passed and we will have no leverage. I'm disappointed that today's efforts won't continue. The North Carolina General Assembly will be laughing at us tomorrow."

Penni told WSWS reporters at the state capitol in Raleigh Wednesday, "I don't think one day will get anyone's attention. We should go on strike until something is done."

A number of teachers posted statements announcing they would be staying out of work again yesterday and calling on other teachers to do the same. While it appears that a number of teachers in Charlotte-Mecklenburg refused to return to work, the NCTU Facebook group administrators, who are closely connected to the union, worked to prevent any broader action.

On Wednesday evening, the NCTU administrators published a statement demanding that teachers return to work the following day. "In the past few hours," it stated, "it has come to our attention, that some educators are planning to call out tomorrow as well. While we know you must do what you believe is right, the admin team of NCTU as well as CMAE [the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Association of Educators teachers union] do not endorse this action. Plans must be deliberate, precise, and calculated when dealing with such a multi-faceted situation. May 16th was the start of a battle that will continue into November, and possibly beyond."

The NCEA and NCTU called Wednesday's rally as a means of letting off steam among discontented educators and preventing a statewide strike, while channeling teachers' opposition behind the dead end of electing Democrats.

In North Carolina, the NCAE invited Democratic Governor Roy Cooper to address the Wednesday rally and declare his solidarity with the teachers, while NCAE President Mark Jewell called on teachers to make sure that Cooper's "friends" were elected in November.

It was Democratic Governor Bev Perdue, however, who slashed hundreds of millions of dollars in public education spending in 2009 and ordered a 0.5 percent wage cut for all teachers in 2011. These attacks were continued under Perdue's Republican successor, Patrick McCrory.

The unions have played the same role in isolating and betraying all the strikes by teachers that have erupted

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since February across the US, including in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona and Colorado. In each case, the unions have worked to prevent any linking up of the strikes across state borders and shut down the struggles without achieving any of teachers' main demands. In every case, the unions insisted that the only way to defend teachers' conditions is to "remember in November" and elect Democrats.

The unions have depended upon pro-union front groups, organized via Facebook, including Arizona Educators United, Oklahoma Teachers United, and North Carolina Teachers United, to shut down the strikes. Tens of thousands of teachers joined these groups because they had no confidence that the unions would organize a struggle in defense of their interests, but the group administrators have worked to keep teachers tied to the unions and the Democratic Party.

The unions were all the more determined to prevent the expansion of the walkout in North Carolina because teachers in South Carolina are set to rally this Saturday in the state capital of Columbia to demand increased school funding.

While teachers returned to work yesterday, none of the conditions that gave rise to the walkout have been resolved. Wendy, who has taught in North Carolina for a decade, described the conditions in her classroom in comments to the WSWS.

"I've seen letters to inform parents of asbestos in the ceiling, and mold issues, broken furniture, leaking ceilings," she said. "We have had bad smells coming from the ventilation system. What concerns me is the increase in student population in my county and the size of the classroom ensure overcrowding. We were just informed that our upcoming fifth graders will be super big so plan on having over 30 kids in a class."

"Another concern is supplies and the constant need of paper, pencils, markers, crayons, glue, tissues, Clorox wipes, dry erase markers, post-it notes. We usually get some from our school but really not enough. Parents donate to our wish list. With our renovation we have asked for new student desks. The ones we have are the ones the school had back in the '90s. A lot are worn down, broken, wobbly, and unsafe. One of the concerns at my school is funding for more counselors, social workers and teacher assistants."

The role of the national teachers' unions—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA)—in shutting down the strikes is an expression of the basic political function of the unions, which act not to defend conditions of workers, but as labor-management businesses, to impose cuts on behalf of the government and corporations and suppress workers' opposition.

In the ongoing *Janus vs. AFSCME* Supreme Court case, which will decide on whether to eliminate compulsory union "agency fees" for public employees, the unions have openly stated that the "trade-off" for such fees is "no strikes," i.e., that the role of the unions is to suppress the outbreak of struggles by workers.

Speaking on May 16 in Los Angeles at a panel before the 2018 Education Writers Association, NEA president Lily Garcia, who has an annual salary of over $370,000, warned the court judges that any attacks on the unions would only undermine their ability to suppress strikes. The NEA's website, which reported on the event, declared: "The question for the Court is whether it would rather see the power of those unions at the bargaining table in a controlled form or in the streets of state capitals."

The shutting down of the strike in North Carolina underscores the necessity for teachers to take the struggle into their own hands by electing rank-and-file committees in every school and community, completely independent of the strikebreaking unions.

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