

Teachers and the political struggle

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26 June 2018

In the aftermath of the strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states, a record number of educators are running for political office.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) reports that more than 100 members in 20 states are running, while the National Education Association (NEA) states there are more NEA members campaigning this year than in the past 20 years. As many as 97 educators or self-described “pro-education” candidates are said to be contesting the June 26 Oklahoma primary.

Nationally, many of the teacher candidates are Democrats, including several ex-military and intelligence agents, while the others are Republicans. There are among them some careerists looking to take advantage of the groundswell of support for teachers, but others are sincerely looking for a political avenue to defend public education. As one Oklahoma candidate told the media, “I just decided now is the time to step out and help fund education the way it should properly be funded. Teachers are encouraging teachers to file. It’s really grassroots organic stuff that is going on with the teachers.”

The decision by teachers to run for political office follows the collective frustration of educators in the aftermath of the betrayal of the statewide strikes by the AFT, NEA and their state affiliates and the impasse facing teachers and school employees. Despite the determination of rank-and-file educators who initiated the largest wave of teachers strikes in decades, the unions isolated and sold out the struggles. The deals the unions reached to end the strikes failed to win teachers’ demands, and the small wage and spending increases will be funded through regressive taxes and budget cuts implemented by state legislators.

The WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* strongly warns that good intentions are not sufficient. In so far as these teachers remain within the confines of the capitalist two-party system and leave unchallenged the economic and political domination of America’s corporate and financial elite, their candidacies cannot advance the interests of the working class. The real question is: What is the political program that is being advanced?

If elected, even the most-sincere educator would immediately confront a whole set of economic and political relations considered sacrosanct under the existing system, above all the so-called “right” of the capitalist owners to monopolize the

wealth and hold society hostage to their profit needs. If teachers accept this set of economic and political relations, then no matter what their intentions they will inevitably end up serving class interests that they may never have intended to.

The struggle to defend and vastly improve public education is indeed a political struggle. However, it is impossible to secure the necessary resources to guarantee high-quality education to all children regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds without a frontal assault on the financial oligarchy that rules America and the world. In other words, the assertion of the social rights of the masses of working people—for living wages, health care, pensions, high-quality education and a future free from oppression and war—means opposing the “right” of the capitalist owners to rule society.

To fight for this, the working class—whose collective labor produces society’s wealth—must be organized as an independent political force. The aim of the working class must not be to appeal to the conscience of the powers-that-be, but to break the dictatorial hold of the banks and corporations and carry out a radical redistribution of wealth.

That can only be accomplished if the working class takes political power in its own hands and establishes a government of the workers, by the workers and for the workers. The fact is that the entire state apparatus, and both big business parties, exist to defend the capitalist system.

There is a direct relationship between the unions’ efforts to promote the election of Democrats and their role in suppressing and shutting down teachers’ strikes this year.

The teachers’ unions play a major role in the Democratic Party, and both AFT President Randi Weingarten and NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia are members of the Democratic National Committee. For decades, the unions covered up for the Democrats even as Bill Clinton, Barack Obama and other Democrats on the state and local levels embraced the most right-wing anti-teacher nostrums, echoing the Republicans in demands for “school choice,” “teacher accountability” and pushing merit pay and other attacks. The unions covered for the Democrats as they joined Republicans in squandering trillions on Wall Street bailouts, corporate tax cuts and endless wars to defend the overseas interests of the same energy giants and corporations that refuse to pay a penny for public education.

The unions opposed the teachers’ strikes that erupted in 2018. The AFT and NEA executives, who invest billions in

teacher pension funds on the stock market and make 10 times more than an average teacher, understood that the strikes were an implicit challenge to the decades-long attack on public education and thus bring teachers into conflict with the Democratic Party. That is why they did everything to crush the strikes before they could coalesce into a unified, nationwide struggle.

The purpose of the unions' electoral drive is now to promote the very political institutions—whether they involve teachers or not—that are responsible for the attack on public education.

The WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party warned teachers about the treacherous role of the unions, called on teachers to take the conduct of the struggle in their own hands, through the formation of rank-and-file committees, and to transform the teachers' revolt into a conscious political struggle by the working class against both corporate-controlled parties and the profit system they defend.

Asked by a WSWs reporter what her attitude was to the growing demands of rank-and-file teachers for a nationwide strike, AFT President Weingarten said that the teacher walkouts had to be “transformed into walk-ins into the voting booth.” Invariably, as the unions were selling out strike after strike, NEA and AFT leaders would announce “Remember in November,” to promote the illusion that the election of Democrats or “pro-education” Republicans would address the teachers' demands.

But the experiences of the teachers have already demonstrated the bankruptcy of such an outlook. Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, championed charter schools and other for-profit education schemes and paved the way for Trump and Betsy DeVos. Governments run by Democrats in Colorado, California, New York and other states have implemented deep attacks on teachers and public education. Despite their “pro-education” posturing, the Democrats who ran state governments in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona before the Republican takeovers handed out corporate tax cuts while reducing educational funding.

Ten years after the global financial crash, conditions facing educators and students are nothing less than scandalous. While a record \$716 billion is being allocated to the military and preparations for new wars, per-pupil funding is below 2008 levels in most states. Teachers in 39 states are earning less in real wages than they did a decade ago, and half of all US educators earn less than a living wage.

The intransigence of the political establishment has proved a valuable lesson for teachers. They confront powerful corporate interests, which control both parties. They cannot fight these forces alone or on a state-by-state basis. A campaign must be begun now to mobilize the broadest support in the working class—including from workers who are entering struggles like UPS, auto and health care workers—for a struggle to defend public education when the schools reopen after the summer break. Appeals should also be made to educators worldwide,

including in Mexico and Canada, who are also involved in battles against austerity.

In opposition to the unions, which function as agents of the government and big business, the Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers and school employees to form rank-and-file committees in every school and community to build up support for a nationwide strike to defend the right to high-quality education for all. Strikes and mass demonstrations must be combined with the building of a mass political movement of the working class, which unites all the battles against inequality, the attack on immigrant workers, police violence, war and the threat of dictatorship—into a single battle for workers' power and socialism.

The working class must not be limited by the fraudulent claims of what capitalism can afford but must fight for a program based on what the vast majority of the population requires. This includes not only full funding for pay, benefits and pension increases for all school workers, but the strengthening and expansion of public education at every level from pre-K through college. Further, the years of damage done by the profit system to public education and the spread of poverty and the opioid public health crisis require, among other remediation, the hiring of thousands of educators to address the impact of the crisis of literacy and culture as well as the upgrade and construction of high-tech facilities in every community.

In the end, the question boils down to this: Which class—the capitalist bankers and corporate owners or the masses of working-class people whose collective labor produces all wealth—will determine how society's resources are to be distributed?

The working class, the vast majority of the population, must take political power in its own hands and put an end to the dictatorship of the banks and big business. The Wall Street banks and major corporations must be transformed into public enterprises, collectively owned and democratically controlled by working people. This program, fought for by the Socialist Equality Party, is the only solution to the funding of education and all the social needs of the population.

We urge teachers to contact the WSWs *Teacher Newsletter* and the SEP to take up the fight for socialism.

The author recommends:

From the July Days to the Kornilov Coup: Lenin's The State and Revolution

[17 October 2017]



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact