

“Teachers will be in the classroom...there will be no labor activity”

Pennsylvania judge breaks teachers’ strike

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Teachers in the northeastern Pennsylvania town of Dallas went on strike on June 19 to fight to secure a contract and oppose school authorities’ demands for cuts in wages and healthcare and pension benefits. The teachers who have been without a contract for three years struck for 22 days at the beginning of the school year in 2017.

Less than 24 hours after the strike began, a Luzerne County judge issued an injunction ordering the teachers back to work, citing a state law that mandates that students receive 180 days of instruction per year. Issuing his back-to-work order, Judge Williams Amesbury, a Democrat who previously ran under the ticket of both parties, was particularly vindictive.

“Teachers will teach, they will be in the classroom, there will be no labor activity,” the judge bellowed. “Do you understand?” He continued, “There are too many people involved; too many children who have the right to an education.”

Union officials from the Dallas Education Association immediately capitulated and submitted to court-supervised bargaining sessions.

The judge’s sudden concern for the right of students to a quality education was disingenuous to say the least. While throwing the book at the teachers—who are fighting not only for improved wages but better funding for their children—the judge has said nothing about those who are really stripping working-class youth of the right to public education.

Students have suffered years of savage budget and program cuts in Dallas and other towns and cities in the economically depressed area, a former coal mining and manufacturing center. In 2016, schools in Dallas and nearby Wyoming, Hanover and Wilkes Barre carried out deep cuts and many threatened close operations altogether because of a state funding crisis.

Pennsylvania already ranks worst in the nation for the gap between rich and poor school districts.

Teachers are well aware that their struggle for the right to education is also bound up with the fight to secure other basic necessities, like access to affordable healthcare, adequate housing and nutrition and good-paying jobs. One teacher, Jacky Fitch, commented on the DEA Facebook page that “Tons of working class families are on some sort government assistance in this country. Whether it’s insurance because companies won’t cover families or employees anymore, or food because the price of items continue to rise. People’s pay isn’t supplemented to coordinate the increase [in living costs] ... In fact, the highest subscriber to government assistance is actually a working class family. This isn’t just a Dallas issue, this is a society issue.”

For its part, the school board authorities have repeatedly refused to sign a contract, even after the union offered to meet the district’s demands for wage freezes and concessions to healthcare and pension benefits. Insisting that the union had not surrendered enough, Dallas School District Solicitor Vito DeLuca said the board couldn’t accept the offer without “defy[ing] the laws of the physics.”

Though this happened in a small town—with a population of less than 3,000—the judge’s ruthless action and the intransigence of the school authorities illustrates the real state of class relations in America. With warnings that a new round of teacher strikes could occur once schools reopen after the summer break, both political parties are preparing state repression.

Last March, as teachers’ strikes spread across the US, Democratic Party school board officials in Jersey City, New Jersey filed for and received a court injunction from a Hudson County judge just hours after 4,000

teachers and school employees walked out. With teachers expressing determination to defy the injunction, the Jersey City Education Association ended the strike.

During the teachers' strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, Colorado and North Carolina, state officials hung the threat of potential court injunctions, massive fines and even jail time over the heads of teachers. Fearing that the teachers would receive popular support if they defied a strikebreaking order, the authorities never pulled the trigger. Instead they relied on the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers and their local affiliates to isolate, strangle and break the strikes.

After opposing the walkouts, the unions worked tirelessly to prevent striking teachers from linking up with those in other states and moved to shut them down as quickly as possible.

As one striking Oklahoma teacher told the WSWS, the "OEA [Oklahoma Education Association] ran out in front of our train which was gaining momentum and started acting like they were leading the train and then said they were stopping the train."

In West Virginia, the WVEA and AFT-WV tried to call the strike off after a few days, but rank-and-file workers rebuffed their efforts and continue the fight. With the teachers lacking an independent organization and a clear political perspective to fight, however, the unions were able to resume control and shut down the strike based on a rotten deal with Governor Jim Justice, a billionaire coal baron who ran as a Democrat in 2016 with the backing of the unions.

The settlement, predictably hailed as a "victory" by the union, the Democrats and their apologists, ignored teachers' demands for affordable health care. The meager five percent pay raise will be funded through slashing other essential programs, including Medicaid for poor children and families.

As they were selling out the strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, the unions insisted that it was pointless to continue fighting against Republican legislators and that the only way forward was to "Remember in November," ie., vote for Democrats in the mid-term elections. But neither of the two big business parties are friends to the working class. They are equally committed to further social attacks on the working class, attacks on democratic rights, and to the

drive to war.

Where Democrats hold power in states like Colorado, New York and California, they have carried out equally savage attacks, albeit with closer collusion with the unions. And as the actions of the Luzerne County judge made clear, the Democrats will use state repression to break strikes just like the Republicans.

In Dallas and other Pennsylvania cities, including Pittsburgh, the unions blocked any strike action that would have coincided with statewide strikes. The DEA first scheduled an initial strike for March 5—in the midst of the West Virginia strike—but pushed it back to April 13 (the day after the unions ended the Oklahoma walkout) and then to May 18 (two weeks after the end of the Arizona strike). A new strike date has now been set for the beginning of the next school year.

In opposition to the deliberate efforts by the unions to divide and weaken teachers, educators should form rank-and-file workplace committees at every schools to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the NEA and AFT, link up with teachers around the country and internationally and prepare a national strike to defend the right to high quality public education. This must be combined with a political counter-offensive by the entire working class against the two parties of big business and the economic dictatorship of the banks and giant corporations over society.



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