

# Arizona teachers return to classrooms with limited gains and broken promises

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Arizona teachers, who conducted the largest of the statewide walkouts last spring, are now returning to the classroom still woefully underpaid. The promises of Republican Governor Doug Ducey and the Arizona Education Association (AEA) that the strike's settlement would mean a ten percent pay increase for all educators this year—and 20 percent by 2020—have already been broken. The scope of the massive betrayal of the powerful strike movement in Arizona is becoming painfully apparent.

In the aftermath of the six-day strike, the state legislature approved a \$306 million increase to education funding, a pitifully inadequate amount in light of the past decade of systematic budget cuts. When the strike erupted, Arizona was spending a whopping \$1.1 billion less than it did in 2008 on public education, having cut per-pupil spending by a shocking 36.6 percent.

Under the new measures, districts are receiving starkly varying increases via a complicated formula, further compounding the effects of failing to fully fund schools. Rural schools have been severely shortchanged, with three districts reporting drops in average pay. Meanwhile teachers are reporting pay increases well below the promised rate: at Littlefield Unified, teachers received a 3 percent increase; Patagonia Public Schools 3.5 percent; and Santa Cruz Elementary 4 percent. Santa Cruz will give its maintenance staff a mere 2 percent pay increase. Other districts are reportedly refusing to give the pay hikes to new hires.

An analysis by the *Arizona Republic* showed 56 districts unable to increase teacher salaries by the promised 10 percent. In a letter to staff explaining this fact, Phoenix Union Superintendent Chad Gestson said the state's allocations were enough for only 6.7 percent raises and limited the number of teachers eligible for the award. Only 17 teachers, 1 percent, in PUSD will receive the 10 percent raise this year.

Arizona teacher pay is so low that that even were educators to receive a 20 percent bump, they would still remain below the median pay for educators nationally!

According to the *Nogales International*, other school workers currently at the state minimum wage of \$10.50 will see a negligible pay increase to \$12 an hour by 2020, with an annual "step increase" of 1.5 percent.

Some districts are seeking to make up the shortfall by taking funds from capital funding, known as District Additional Assistance, and diverting them to teacher pay. This is despite the fact that funds for capital improvements are still about 70 percent below 2008 levels.

In order to pay wage increases, Tucson Unified School District has decided to forgo a backlog of school repairs as well as plans to hire more counselors and social workers. Admitting that he was "robbing Peter to pay Paul," Tucson Superintendent Gabriel Trujillo said that the district now has "zero capacity" to deal with maintenance needs. If any computers broke, he said, they could not be replaced.

"Each district went into the Red for Ed events in very different financial circumstances, some were really strapped, and others were wealthier," Arizona educator Steve told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Some teachers will see 8 to 9 percent increases in my district and people are asking what happened to the 20 percent by 2020. Of course, the politicians want to give as little as they can. There is a lot of disappointment and disaffection. We really need to keep going.

"I am especially concerned because a lot of the paraprofessionals didn't get any extra money. This was one of the things that got us out of bed and downtown [protesting]—so that the paras who worked with our most special students would get the money they deserve. I feel really badly about that.

"We didn't go through this whole experience to end like this, as if nothing happened. What we need to keep in mind is that we are still, as a state, \$1 billion less funded than 10 years ago. We need to keep talking about that. They want to tell us how we are making progress, but we are still \$1 billion behind.

"As they say, 'Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.' We won't get fooled again—that should be our motto."

The deal that ended the April 26 to May 2 strike was pushed through in a backroom conspiracy by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the AEA, who forced teachers back to work without a vote.

AFT President Randi Weingarten arrived in Phoenix just one day before the termination of the strike. The union was determined to end the walkout, as in every other statewide strike, as quickly as possible to prevent teachers from linking up nationwide. In fact, over 10,000 teachers were marching in neighboring Colorado when Arizona teachers walked out, but the unions blocked the unification of the two struggles.

While each of the spring teacher struggles—West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona—occurred as a result of educators briefly breaking the stranglehold the unions and organizing independently, the political unclarity of teachers on the nature of

the pro-capitalist unions and the capitalist system itself left them vulnerable to being misdirected. In other words, without a clear recognition of the unions' organic hostility to their struggle and the formation of genuinely independent rank-and-file organizations, teachers became susceptible to the machinations of the politicians, the unions and the pseudo-left groups that orbit them.

In Arizona, Noah Karvelis and the Arizona Educators United (AEU) Facebook page played a particularly duplicitous and instrumental role by claiming to be "100 percent rank and file" and independent. The group gained teachers' confidence while, behind the scenes, the AEU conspired with AEA President Joe Thomas and the other union executives to limit and then shut down the strike.

"What we have right now is the most we could possibly get through this avenue," declared Karvelis, endorsing the return to work and promising that teachers would receive a 20 percent pay increase. "Our thought was that if they [the legislature] would have conceded more to us, it would already have happened by now", he complacently noted.

Rebecca Garelli of the AEU, who has close connections to the pseudo-left Labor Notes publication, said, "The K-12 budget was passed and signed, so that means our job is done, and we are going to return to our classes tomorrow." This policy of complete surrender was diametrically opposed by teachers. As it was, 93 percent of AEU's own site liaisons voted to continue the strike, but to no avail.

Steve reflected on the experience, "Some of our leaders of Red for Ed, I've met them, they're nice people and may be on their way to 'greatness' but really they have an agenda. This [our struggle] is really about being fair to everyone who takes care of the kids; they all should be well paid and happy. We are a million miles away from that.

"Yes, the union has sold us a bill a goods. This is the biggest issue I have with a lot of colleagues. For instance, no one ever asked us to picket. It was like Red for Ed was a show for TV, about controlling the optics. They squandered the opposition.

"V.I. Lenin wrote an article about 'who benefits;' I'll never forget this. He talked about the role of the British financiers getting rich in World War I. All my life I've seen this. Who benefits? It is never the workingman. Our struggle has to be the beginning, not just the end," he concluded.

The sellout by the union was implemented precisely when the strike was strongest and could have won wider support from workers in the US and around the world. Teachers were stripped of a deciding vote on the matter. This betrayal was completely sanctioned by Karvelis and the AEU administrators who immediately hailed it as a "victory." Now reportedly president-elect of his local, Karvelis and his colleagues were recently feted at the annual conference of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization.

As an Arizona teacher cogently wrote to the WSWs, "I believe if the unions had not abruptly ended the RedforEd Movement we had the momentum and the will to continue the walkout until our demands were met. As of now, NONE of RedforEd's demands have been achieved. The union leaders told the thousands strong

crowd at the Capitol that our movement's successes were historic and that this was as much as we could possibly ever get from this legislature.

"We were told this budget was a victory and we should continue our victory at the voting polls in November. However, we are precisely at the exact same spot we were before the movement began. Nothing has been gained for teachers, for education, for staff, or for our students."

The union's aim from the outset was to stifle the strike and channel teachers' opposition into pro-capitalist electoral policies. One of its purposes was to convince teachers that nothing can be won through struggle and the only legitimate avenue is through electoral politics—i.e., voting for the Democratic Party.

In this vein, the AEU and the AEA worked in tandem throughout the summer to line teachers up canvassing for "The Invest in Education Act," a November ballot initiative, and Democratic Party "teacher candidates."

The Act, if passed, would raise income taxes on individuals making more than \$250,000 to provide some additional, though far less than necessary, funding for education. The AEU preaches the age-old reformist prescription that teachers should aim to make the capitalist tax structure "more fair"—rather than contest the right of the super-rich, through their ownership of giant corporations and control of government, to funnel endless billions into their coffers. Predictably even this timid ballot initiative is facing a full-court press by big businesses and the wealthy who are not about to see a penny of their ill-gotten tax cuts eliminated.

It is indicative of the ruthless nature of contemporary capitalism that even the teachers' small pay increases will be extracted from the working class through other means: a new fee on motorists and increasing property taxes within low-income districts.

The horrific growth of social inequality and attacks on social rights which drove teachers to strike in Arizona continue to deepen across the whole country and the world. At the heart of the teachers' battle is an irreconcilable class conflict. Teachers, students and workers of all description are on one side and the billionaire ruling elites, Democratic and Republican politicians, the unions and their apologists are on the other.

Educators in Arizona and across the country confront not just individual state governments or unions, but the entire capitalist system based on the continuous suppression of workers' wages for the enrichment of the financial oligarchy. New genuinely rank and file-controlled organizations are needed to link up and expand the struggle of teachers with all sections of the working class in the US and internationally.



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