

As students return to school, US teachers face nationwide struggle to defend education

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As the new school year begins across the United States, teachers are angry and determined. None of the demands teachers and school employees raised in last spring's strikes and protests in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, Colorado and North Carolina have been met. Many of the supposed gains touted by the teachers' unions have proven to be fictitious, and next to nothing has been done to restore the billions of dollars in education cuts carried out over the past decade.

It has not taken long for the claims of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) and their pseudo-left allies such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the International Socialist Organization (ISO) that the spring struggles resulted in "victories" to be exposed as lies.

In each state, teachers are returning to school facing broken promises. In West Virginia, there is no fix for health care funding under the Public Employee Insurance Agency. In Arizona, the \$1 billion in school funding has not been restored and wage increases for many teachers have fallen far short of the contract terms announced by the unions.

As the new school term begins, contract battles are ongoing in Seattle and Spokane, Washington. Teachers in the Los Angeles United School District, the second largest in the US, have been working without a contract for a year and negotiations are at an impasse. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers has agreed to work under an expired contract until after the midterm elections, pointedly avoiding any action in November that might prove embarrassing to Democratic Party candidates. Unions are similarly forcing educators to work under expired or extended contracts in other locations such as Denver, Colorado and Oakland, California.

The conditions are emerging for teachers to link up their struggles with those of hundreds of thousands of other workers in the US and internationally. Some 230,000 United Parcel Service workers, who voted by more than 90 percent to strike when their contract expired on July 31, are battling a conspiracy between the company and the Teamsters union,

which extended the contract indefinitely in an effort to force through a sellout that establishes a second tier of lower-paid "hybrid" driver-warehouse workers and maintains poverty wages for the bulk of the workforce.

Some 200,000 postal workers face contract expiration in September, and contracts will soon expire for steel, telecom and entertainment workers.

A report by the Brookings Institution looked at teachers' salaries and per-pupil spending on a state-by-state basis and concluded that conditions were "favorable" this fall for statewide teachers' strikes in such largely nonunion states as Mississippi, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Idaho, New Mexico, South Carolina, South Dakota and Utah. Brookings added that growing calls for action have been reported in Indiana and Texas. An *Education Week*blog predicted that Louisiana would be next.

As school doors open, what is the state of education in America?

- According to *Education Week*, the average teacher in 30 states makes less than a "livable wage." One in five holds down a second job to make ends meet; many have three jobs. In rural Colorado districts, the earnings of 95 percent of teachers are less than the cost of living.

- In addition to spending hundreds of dollars out of their own pockets for school supplies, teachers are using charity appeals through crowdsourcing sites to provide resources for students. DonorsChoose.org reports a record 76,000 requests from teachers so far for this year.

- School districts in Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Arizona and Asheville, North Carolina are building dormitories, "tiny homes" or small apartments to try to attract or retain teachers making wages so low they cannot afford housing. Homelessness among teachers is a growing phenomenon.

- Instruction time is being cut. In Georgia, 70 percent of districts have shortened the school year and 20 percent of Oklahoma schools have only a four-day week.

- Tens of thousands of young people are being taught by substitute teachers and uncertified or emergency-credentialed personnel. In Oklahoma, an unprecedented

1,400 individuals received emergency credentials last year, 84 percent of whom were brought into the classroom with no prior education experience. This school year the situation is worse.

- Special education is in a state of collapse. The majority of US states fail to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, according to a new report. As a result of the teacher shortage, large numbers of special education classrooms, with the most difficult educational challenges, are headed by individuals without specialized training and only a bachelor's degree.

- The overall teacher shortage has reached emergency proportions in most states, as the pay gap between teachers and other college graduates increases. Every year, fewer college-bound young people opt to become teachers as a result of poverty wages, worsening working conditions and the inevitable strain of thousands of dollars of student loan debt.

- Under the Obama administration—endorsed twice by the AFT and NEA—the net defunding of public education is estimated at \$19 billion, adjusting for inflation.

The conditions facing teachers and students across the US are the result of a decades-long social counterrevolution—a policy of budget cuts coupled with massive tax cuts for the wealthy implemented by Democrats and Republicans at all levels of government. Both parties have overseen a drive to privatize education and transform it into a new source of profit for corporate executives and big investors.

This has been made possible by the betrayals carried out by the AFT and NEA. They have focused their efforts on suppressing and shutting down strikes. The unions' unstinting support for Obama and his pro-privatization agenda has set the stage for Trump and billionaire Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, a rabid opponent of public education and advocate of charter and for-profit schools.

The wave of teachers' strikes last winter and spring was organized by rank-and-file teachers independently of and in opposition to the teachers' unions. In West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, teachers defied Democratic and Republican officials alike and shut down the schools, only, in the end, to be betrayed by the unions, which were able to exploit the absence of a conscious political leadership among the teachers and genuinely democratic rank-and-file organizations to gain control of the struggles in order to shut them down and sell them out.

The unions were given critical assistance by forces in control of rank-and-file Facebook sites that backed the union betrayals and opposed any political challenge to the domination of the big-business political parties. They blacklisted the *World Socialist Web Site* and barred postings by the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*, which called for teachers

to form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to mobilize broader sections of the working class and raised the need for socialist policies to defend public education.

They worked hand-in-glove with groups such as the DSA and the ISO, which covered for the unions as they demanded that the teachers end their strikes and channel their militancy into the dead end of backing the Democrats in the upcoming midterm elections.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers and school workers to form rank-and-file workplace committees and neighborhood committees of teachers, parents and students to defend and expand public education and secure the right of all workers to a living wage, health care and a secure retirement. Oppose the anti-education, anti-teacher conspiracy of the government, the corporations and the unions by linking up the struggle of teachers with those of UPS workers, postal workers and the working class as a whole!

The struggle over the right to education boils down to this: Which class—the capitalist bankers and corporate owners or the working class, 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 into 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. The fortunes of the financial oligarchy must be expropriated and used to provide good-paying jobs, education, health care and housing for all. This program, fought for by the Socialist Equality Party, is the only answer to the defunding of education and the basic social services on which working people depend.



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