

US teacher unions' "Remember in November" fizzles

J. Cooper

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The teacher strikes and massive demonstrations from last February to April, in West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma, Colorado, Kentucky and other states, fighting for long-overdue wage increases, against attacks on health care benefits and pensions, heralded an unprecedented struggle against the decades-long destruction of funding for public education and the explosive growth of charter schools nationwide.

While these struggles quickly gained popular support from parents, students and the broader communities, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their local affiliates swooped down to throttle the momentum of these struggles, shut them down, and, in the words of AFT President Randi Weingarten, transform the walkouts "into walk-ins into the voting booth."

The sabotaging of the strike wave by the unions turned into a cynical maneuver for political support to the Democratic Party in the 2018 midterm elections. The anger and frustration of teachers that erupted in the massive demonstrations in defense of public education resulted in hundreds of well-meaning educators deciding to run for public office, particularly for state legislative positions against those legislators seen as the most intransigent opponents of the teachers' demands. Most of them ran as Democrats, some as Republicans, both big-business parties of war and social inequality. The union apparatus threw millions of dollars and thousands of man-hours into campaigning for "pro-education" candidates. While the bureaucrats are now spinning the election results as a "big win for education," a closer look is needed.

Education Week has broken down the results of these efforts. Its survey included only those who had not previously declared candidacy or been in office. The publication included only current educators competing for state legislative office who decided to participate in the elections following the "teacher spring." Of the 177 educators who chose to seek office following the spring strikes and protests, 57 lost in their primary races, 76 lost in

the just-concluded November midterms, and 42 were successful. Of these, nine ran as Republicans and 33 as Democrats.

Grabbing many front-page headlines, and inducing much rapture from the union heads, is the election in Connecticut of Democrat Jahana Hayes, 2016 "Teacher of the Year," to the US House of Representatives. But Hayes, whatever her intentions, is a very junior member of a very right-wing, anti-education party which cannot be transformed into a progressive force no matter how many lies the unions peddle. Hayes will vote for Nancy Pelosi for speaker and will accept whatever budget deals Pelosi and the Democrats make with Trump and the Republicans, giving them a bit of "left" window-dressing.

In all four states where the teacher strikes and protests gained the most national attention, West Virginia, Kentucky, Arizona and Oklahoma, the Republican Party retained control in both the State Senate and House chambers and the governor's mansion.

In West Virginia, three of six teacher candidates won state office. Only two incumbent Republican state house members out of 47 lost to a Democratic opponent. Richard Ojeda, one of the "CIA Democrats" enthusiastically supported by the NEA and AFT, lost his bid for a US House seat in West Virginia's 3rd Congressional District. He has subsequently announced his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020.

In Oklahoma, every incumbent Republican running for state legislature retained his or her seat, while three Democratic Party incumbents lost to Republican challengers. Oklahoma saw the highest number of educators seeking political office, 66. Of these, 37 lost in primaries, 23 lost in the general election, only six were elected.

In Arizona, one educator won, while six lost in the general election. David Garcia, the Democratic challenger supported by Arizona Educators United and the Arizona Education Association, lost his bid to unseat Republican governor Doug Ducey by a wide margin. And in Kentucky, with 20 teacher candidates originally declared, three were elected, 12

lost the general election and five had been defeated in the primaries.

The NEA and AFT threw all their eggs into the electoral basket, exhorting their members and those who had supported the teachers' strikes to campaign and vote for any and every candidate who expressed even marginal support for education, particularly in the Democratic Party. The NEA and the AFT each spent over \$20 million between support to candidates, PACs (Political Action Committees) and lobbying during the 2018 election cycle.

Lily Eskelsen Garcia, president of the NEA, hailed the gubernatorial victories of Democrats Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan, J.B. Pritzker in Illinois, Laura Kelly in Kansas and Tim Walz, a former teacher, in Minnesota by saying, "Those are indescribable wins for public education." Actually, these are "wins" only for the union officials, who will gain a "place at the table" in those states, helping the new Democratic governors decide how best to impose agendas of austerity and budget-cutting, while insuring that the unions continue to collect their entirely undeserved dues tribute from the teachers they are selling out.

There were many state-wide ballot proposals that would impact education spending. These saw contradictory results. Colorado Amendment 73 would have introduced a graduated tax structure, increasing taxes on individuals earning over \$150,000 per year, and on businesses. This measure failed by 53.64 percent to 46.36 percent. It was specifically put forward to create a "Quality Public Education Fund." The organizations opposing this amendment outspent supporters by nearly 2-1. A similar measure in Arizona was ruled off the ballot by the state Supreme Court in August, when the Chamber of Commerce and other business interests challenged the proposal.

In Arizona, a measure to prohibit the state and local governments from enacting new or increased taxes on services (regressive taxes supported by the teacher unions as "pro-children") was passed 64.23 percent to 35.77 percent after business interests raised \$10 million compared to the \$122,000 raised by "Stand for Children" and the "No on Proposition 126" PACs. At the same time, a proposal to expand "scholarships" to enable the use of public school funds for private school education for any Arizona student was defeated by nearly the same margin. Governor Ducey, along with the Goldwater Institute and other openly right-wing forces campaigned for a "yes" vote, while the defeated David Garcia and other organizations supporting public education opposed the measure.

What conclusions do the likes of Eskelsen Garcia and Weingarten draw from the midterm elections? "Today we begin the race for 2020," says Eskelsen Garcia. The WSWS statement "Teachers and the political struggle" noted, "the

experiences of the teachers have already demonstrated the bankruptcy of such an outlook."

It was clear that masses of working people and students supported the teachers when they marched in the thousands, mobilized initially by rank-and-file educators outside the domination of the NEA and AFT. The groundswell of support from West Virginia to Arizona indicated that independent action by the working class inspired millions across the country, and in fact, across the world. However, without independent, well-organized and principled organization, the teachers' strikes were reined in by the NEA and the AFT, and brought to heel. The union apparatus, assisted by the pseudo-lefts in the leadership of Arizona Educators United, for example, sank the rank-and-file movement into the slogan "Remember in November."

During the course of the spring struggles, the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party fought for teachers to build independent rank-and-file committees, to break from the unions and wage a struggle for decent wages, full funding of education, health care and pensions, and for a turn to other sections of workers coming into struggle among Teamsters, communications workers, autoworkers. Teachers will have no choice but to continue to fight for the unresolved issues first raised last spring. The struggles will erupt, and a new leadership must be built.

Last week's election results demonstrate that the basic needs of teachers and all working people cannot be met through the two capitalist parties and an election process dominated by billionaires, corporate interests and the financial elite. The aim of the sincere educators who sought to make a difference in the elections, and the working class as a whole, must be to break the hold of the banks and corporations and carry out a radical redistribution of wealth. As the WSWS said in June, "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 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."



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