

Virginia teachers plan statewide protest to demand school funding

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The Virginia Educators United (VEU) has called a statewide march of educators in Richmond for January 28, as mass protests, strikes and sickouts continue among teachers across the United States. More than 30,000 Los Angeles educators are set to strike January 10, while thousands of California teachers have held sickouts or rallies this month in Oakland, Fremont and Rocklin. The East Bay Coalition for Public Education will also hold a mass protest January 12.

The teachers' movement that began last February in West Virginia—spreading to Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, North and South Carolina and Washington state—is clearly expanding in the face of the continued assault on public education. Charter school teachers have joined the growing number of walkouts as well, with a recent strike against Acero in Chicago.

In each of these cases, however, the teachers' unions forced a return to work without securing educators' demands. The National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) shuttered the strikes and told teachers they could advance their aims if they voted Democratic in the midterm elections. As became apparent in the course of the Supreme Court case *Janus v. AFSCME*, the highly compensated union hierarchy has openly pledged to prevent strikes in exchange for their "seat at the table" and continued dues income stream. The problems faced by Virginia teachers must be placed into the context of the lessons of these betrayed struggles.

What do teachers in Virginia confront? A public education system devastated by years of underfunding, which has proceeded apace under both Democrats and Republicans. In 2017 Democratic Governor Terry McAuliffe pointed to the chronic teacher shortage, observing that no sixth grades in the Petersburg schools had a math teacher for the entire year. Yet he offered no increase in teacher salaries to attract new educators, and instead provided \$1 million to recruit and train principals and a similar sum to automate the licensing process.

A few figures underscore the dire situation faced now by

teachers, children and families in the state:

- Since 2009, total employment for Virginia public schools has declined by 1,242, even as K-12 enrollment increased by more than 50,000.

- Virginia teachers' salaries average \$51,049, well below the national average of \$59,660—which itself is low given rising costs of health care and other necessities. A newly hired teacher in Virginia with a college degree will earn \$17,000 less than their classmates who go to the private sector.

- Teachers must endure a probationary period of five years before receiving any type of job security. Meanwhile, data collection and standardized testing pressures tend to demoralize new teachers, and nearly half of them leave the profession during that extraordinary long "probation." Unfilled teaching positions—not only in music and physical education but in general education at the elementary level and in "core" high school subjects such as English—plague the state.

- Public schools depend on a combination of local level and state funding. Per pupil spending by the state has declined 9.1 percent since the financial crash of 2008, leaving Virginia 40th in the country in terms of state funding. Major problems with facilities abound, including buildings that are leaking, decaying and have mice and vermin. The average Virginia school building is around 60 years old. Even 100-year-old buildings are not unusual.

As is the case in many other US states, the differential between Virginia's state and local school funding allows wealthier districts and cities to more generously fund their public schools and underfund those in poorer areas—a *de facto* form of segregation on the basis of class.

In short, the grossly underfunded education system represents an entirely legitimate subject for political action not just for educators and students but for the entire working class. A movement advancing the view of education as a social right for all would garner immediate and militant support by workers everywhere.

However, teachers must be forewarned as to the political

limitations of the January 28 mass march. Although many of the teachers involved in the protests are rightly suspicious of the role of the unions, the VEU has scheduled the one-day protest to coincide with the Virginia Education Association's (VEA) lobbying day. This is meant to bolster the credibility of the VEA and promote the illusion that improvements in pay and school funding can be won by appealing to corporate-controlled politicians. In fact, nothing can be achieved outside of mobilizing the teachers and broader section of workers throughout Virginia and across the US and against both parties and the powerful corporate and financial interests that stand behind them.

While many of this year's teachers strikes were initiated by rank-and-file teachers, not the unions, the NEA, AFT and their state and local affiliates were able to reassert their control and strangle these struggles with the assistance of a series of Facebook-organized groups, which had not organizational or political independence from the unions.

Arizona Educators United, Oklahoma Teachers United and others attracted a mass following of teachers who were fed up with years of union collusion in poverty-level pay, worsening schools and regressive taxation for schools that hit working-class residents the hardest. These "Red4Ed" groups, however, were controlled by supporters of union aligned organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America, Bad Ass Teachers, Labor Notes and the International Socialist Organization which dutifully supported the calling off of strikes and hailed the betrayals as "victories."

This reporter spoke to Cheryl Binkley, a VEU founding member, who explained that North Carolina's one day protest in May is the model for the January action, a one-day lobbying affair in alliance with the VEA that closes schools. Explaining that the VEU was set up last spring after discussions with the union, she said: "We went to VEA and they said, 'You can't do this [set up a grassroots protest group], you need two years to build for this.' We didn't listen to them. We said if we don't participate it's going happen without us, and so all of us decided to participate," she said.

Noting "they [the unions] wound it down in West Virginia and everywhere else," the VEU representative said their group made a deliberate decision that the January action would be a protest and *not a strike* in order not to be "unfair" to newly elected Democratic governor Ralph Northam! The governor, she claimed, "deserved a chance" to enact education-friendly policies. On Tuesday, the group praised Northam's budget proposals for a tiny five percent raise for teachers and support staff along with a one-time bonus of one percent of their salaries over a two-year period.

In other words, the VEU is playing the same role as the

other "Red4Ed" groups—as a secondary enforcer to prevent the struggles of teachers from breaking out of the straight-jacket of the unions and the capitalist two-party system.

Virginia teachers, including those attracted to VEU, must draw the lessons of the 2018 struggles and take the conduct of their fight out of the hands of the unions. Rank-and-file action committees of teachers and other workers, which are independent of the unions, should be formed in every school and community. They should formulate demands for substantial increases in wages and schools funding, smaller class sizes and the hiring of more staff. These committees should prepare for strike action and link up the struggle of educators with autoworkers, logistics and port workers, shipyard workers, health care workers and other strategic sections of the working class in Virginia, across the US and internationally.

Teachers not accept the lie that there is no money, when trillions are spent on bank bailouts, corporate tax giveaways and endless wars. The funding necessary to provide high quality public education for all can only be secured through a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate and financial oligarchy by the working class and the socialist reorganization of society based on the principles of equality and genuine democracy.

The author also recommends:

Chicago teacher union shuts down charter school strike, holds rally for Democratic candidates
[11 December 2018]

Detroit public meeting resolves to organize fight against General Motors plant closures
[10 December 2018]



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