

Mobilize the working class to defend public education!

Virginia teachers and the fight against social inequality

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Teachers from across Virginia marching today are joining a growing movement of teachers, students and workers in the US and around the world against social inequality and attacks on public education.

More than 33,000 teachers in Los Angeles just conducted a six-day strike, Denver teachers have voted to launch their first strike in 25 years, and Oakland teachers have organized sickouts to oppose the closing of a third of the district's public schools. Last year, teachers conducted a wave of statewide strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, Colorado and other states.

This is part of a worldwide battle. In southern India, 700,000 teachers and state government employees have been on indefinite strike since Tuesday over job security, pay and retirement rights. "Red Pen" teachers have joined "yellow vest" protesters on the streets of France denouncing crumbling schools, low pay and lack of educational supplies. This follows clashes between educators and police in Greece, and Dutch teachers are scheduled to strike in March.

All over the world, workers are fighting to defend their social rights. Some 70,000 workers in Matamoros, Mexico, right across the border from Brownsville, Texas, are engaged in a wildcat strike against sweatshop conditions and poverty wages. Last week, the workers marched to US border and called on their American brothers and sisters to join the fight.

This is one fight, the world over. On one side, are hundreds of millions of workers and young people. On the other side, is a corporate oligarchy that is demanding the destruction of public education, healthcare and pensions.

Virginia teachers are rightfully incensed at the callous

defunding of public education in the state, one of the wealthiest in the US. Northern Virginia is awash with cash flowing to Fortune 500 companies. However, over \$1 billion has been cut from education since 2008, and wages have not been increased, driving more and more educators out of the profession.

Too often students sit in severely overcrowded classes or are taught by poorly paid substitutes. Virginia's teachers are some of the most inequitably paid in the nation.

It is high time for action. But educators must draw the lessons of the past year of struggles by teachers.

First, far from unifying teachers and other sections of workers, the teachers' unions have proven to be the biggest obstacle. Today AFT President Randi Weingarten—who makes \$514,144 a year—will make a speech, no doubt saying she is "proud" of Virginia teachers. She has flown around the US during the past year as the gravedigger of struggles, concluding sell-out agreements behind the backs of teachers.

In Los Angeles, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), which is affiliated with both the NEA and AFT, rammed through a rotten agreement last week in the most undemocratic manner possible, giving teachers only a few hours to review and vote on the deal reached with the school board and state Democrats. It featured the same pay increase offered from the outset and no solution on class sizes or staffing.

In Denver, Colorado, teachers expected to be on the picket lines today as Virginia educators march across Richmond. But the union has called off the strike, accepting a series of delaying tactics by the school administration. In West Virginia last year, teachers

rebelled against the efforts of the union to force through an agreement, displaying an immense determination to fight. Tragically, however, teachers lacked independent organizations to carry forward the struggle.

The Virginia Educators United, in league with the Virginia Education Association, is *not* fighting for national strike action. As in the other struggles of teachers, the unions are attempting to let off steam while working behind the scenes with Democratic politicians to reach an agreement that fails to meet the demands of teachers.

The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party urge teachers to take matters into their own hands by electing rank-and-file committees at every school and in every community. These committees must reject what the political establishment and the unions say is “affordable” and base themselves on what is necessary for the working class. They must fight to link up the struggle of educators across the US and internationally, and mobilize the immense power of the working class.

The attack on public education is a bipartisan conspiracy supported by both the Democrats and Republicans. The escalating attack on public education under Trump was prepared by the Obama administration, which oversaw the destruction of the jobs of hundreds of thousands of teachers and other school workers and a vast expansion of charter schools.

Democrats, who currently control state governments in California, New York, Colorado, New Jersey and other states, are also spearheading corporate-backed “school reform” and attacks on teachers’ wages, health care and pensions. In Virginia, Governor Northam, a Democrat, has proposed a meager five percent pay raise for Virginia’s teachers, which would not even make up for the cost of inflation over the past few years. In the aftermath of \$1 billion in funding cuts, he proposes a mere \$35 million to split between Virginia’s hardest-hit public school districts.

The right to a publicly funded education is an achievement won over centuries of struggle, dating back to the American Revolution and Civil War and the mass working-class battles to abolish child labor and Jim Crow segregation. But the egalitarian and democratic principles embodied in public education are incompatible with a society dominated by social and economic inequality. In its mad pursuit of more wealth,

the American ruling class, like its counterparts around the world, are hell-bent on returning to the days of a class-based education system when only those wealthy enough could afford a proper education while the children of workers were confined to ignorance and hard labor.

The question of how society’s wealth is to be allocated is, above all, a question of which class holds political power. However bitter their conflicts over foreign policy, both the Democrats and Republicans insist that there is no money for education or any other pressing social need. At the same time, they can find trillions to squander on Wall Street bailouts, corporate tax cuts, endless wars of conquest and attacks on immigrant workers.

If the wealth created by the collective labor of workers is to be used to secure the social rights of the vast majority, instead of further enriching the wealthy few, then workers must take political power in their own hands. This means replacing the government of the capitalist billionaires and multimillionaires with a workers’ government to expropriate and redistribute the wealth monopolized by the super-rich and reorganize economic life based on the principles of international socialism.



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