

Virginia teachers protest education cuts

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29 January 2019

Several thousand public school teachers and support staff protested outside of Virginia's State Assembly building in Richmond Monday to demand improved pay and school funding. Virginia teachers are the latest group of educators to stage walkouts and protests against the bipartisan assault on teachers and public education.

According to the *Washington Post*, school districts in Arlington, Prince William and Henrico counties as well as the city of Richmond were forced to call last minute school closures due to the number of teachers calling off of work and effectively carrying out a one-day strike Monday. As in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, strikes by teachers and other public employees are illegal in the state of Virginia.

The protests in Richmond take place less than a week after the unions shut down the six-day strike by 33,000 teachers in Los Angeles, the second largest school district in the US. In Denver, the unions called off a planned strike on Monday in Denver after school officials appealed to Colorado's Democratic Governor Jared Polis to intervene. Teachers are threatening to strike in Oakland, Sacramento and other California cities. Internationally, 700,000 teachers and government workers continue to strike in Tamil Nadu, India, while in France educators are joining "Red Pen" protests in support of the ongoing Yellow Vests protests.

Teachers in Virginia were keenly aware that their struggle and demonstration was an expression of this ongoing class movement of workers, which began in earnest in 2018 with the mass walkouts of West Virginia teachers in the state directly next to them. "Get capitalism out of public education!" said one teacher to the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter*. WSWS supporters distributed a statement calling on teachers to form rank-and-file school and workplace committees to take the struggle for public education out

of the hands of the corporatist trade unions.

Langa, a teacher from Chesapeake, said he heard about the strike of 70,000 maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico, from reading the WSWS. "I support Matamoros and what they are doing," he said. "We are entering a new Gilded Age and it is not only coming to the United States but Mexico, too. These workers have to fight."

Ana, a teacher from the southern Virginia city of Danville, said her main concern was "the quality of education for students. I want smaller class sizes and the district to be rid of SOLs (standardized testing)," which she explained "serve as a business model for the state to control funding stipulations and phase out teachers." Janette also explained that the stress of teaching led to co-workers quitting, which "hurts kids too, children need stability."

Sandra, a college freshman and West Virginia resident who came to support Virginia teachers, told the WSWS she wished "more teachers were able to protest freely, the solution lies here."

Striking educators in West Virginia, who initiated the strike in opposition to the unions, were sent back to work by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and their state affiliates without achieving any of their key demands for school funding and health benefits. "Teachers shouldn't have stopped and settled for less," Sandra said.

Virginia Governor Ralph Northam is a Democrat and the party has controlled the governorship in the state for 12 of the last 16 years. Since the 2008 financial recession, successive Virginia state governments have cut over \$1 billion from public schools. Over 1,000 such positions stood vacant statewide in the 2016–2017 school year. Despite the state of Virginia having the 12th largest state economy in the country, teachers are paid \$8,000 less than the average national teacher's

salary, or 79 percent of the average private sector worker's pay.

The march was called by Virginia Educators United, which is closely aligned with the Virginia Education Association and its parent union, the National Education Association. Fresh from overseeing the sellout of the Los Angeles teachers—forced to vote on a deal before getting enough time to read it—AFT President Randi Weingarten and NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia were both on hand. They have spent much of the last year trying to prevent teacher walkouts from occurring simultaneously and coalescing into a broader national strike.

At the rally on the state capitol's lawn, union officials made patronizing statements about the bravery of teachers while seeking to politically bind them to Governor Northam and other state Democrats. "We've got a friend in the governor's mansion," claimed Virginia Education Association President Jim Livingstone. He repeated the absurd slogan, "remember in November," used by union officials to short-circuit the struggles of striking West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona teachers in 2018 during the midterm season.

Northam, prior to serving as Virginia governor, was lieutenant governor in the Democratic administration of Terry McAuliffe, responsible for successive budget cuts for both K-12 and higher education during his four years in office.

Livingstone and other speakers extolled the Republican-dominated state legislature's decision, announced during the march, which would provide for a minuscule 5 percent pay raise for Virginia educators. Such a gesture, which the conservative *Richmond Times-Dispatch* noted would represent "the largest single-year raise for teachers in about 15 years," would hardly scrape the surface in addressing teachers' declining real income and the crisis in Virginia's public education system, bled dry after years of budget cuts.

The real priorities of Northam and other state politicians were on display in a Sunday article published in the British *Guardian*. Titled "Virginia students learn in trailers while state offers Amazon huge tax breaks," the publication notes that Northam's proposed 5 percent pay increase for state educators, totaling \$269 million, is dwarfed in comparison to the \$750 million in tax breaks offered the web commerce giant for positioning its second headquarters in northern

Virginia.

Teachers who spoke to the WSWS also noted the favorable political treatment given to the defense industry and other corporate giants in the state. Janette told the WSWS Virginia "is one of the leading states in the country for the school-to-prison pipeline. The money they put towards putting kids in jail here is ridiculous compared to the money they give to public education."

Tia, a volunteer teacher's aide, told reporters that politicians like Northam "use education as a platform to get elected but once they get into office, they always fall short. They don't listen to their constituents, money goes into the private industry."



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