West Virginia teachers angered over renewed attack on public education

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In an extraordinary parliamentary session, members of the West Virginia state legislature are attempting to fast-track a “Comprehensive Education Reform” bill that would further eviscerate public education in the state. The debate takes place almost exactly one year after the nine-day strike that galvanized teachers across the US but failed to fix the decades-long defunding of education and public sector health care in the state.

Senate Bill 451, championed by state Senate president Mitch Carmichael, a Republican, would introduce charter schools, authorize the use of education savings accounts for private and religious schools, increase class sizes, remove tenure from teachers and principals, eliminate seniority rights during layoffs, and increase punishments for teachers who go on strike, among other anti-public education measures.

Of paramount concern to the unions is the omnibus bill’s “payroll protection” clause, which requires annual sign-up for dues checkoff, thereby threatening the organizations’ income stream.

At more than 130 pages in length, the bill was read to the full Senate yesterday as angry teachers and parents lined the press galleries and jeered senators. A follow-up demonstration was held in the evening outside the Senate chambers.

Teachers in Mingo County, one of the southern coalfield counties whose wildcats last spring sparked the statewide strike, voted on Tuesday by 97 percent for a one-day strike in response to the bill. However, the union’s wording of the proposal contained the caveat “should circumstances surrounding the omnibus education bill merit a work stoppage.” According to local media in Williamson, the sentiment at the meeting of both union and nonunion teachers was overwhelmingly for a strike.

“If we don't stand against this now, then we're not going to have anything to fight for next year," said Lorraine Davis, a Tug Valley High teacher. Another teacher, Patricia Murphy said, "I don't even know where to begin, there's so many bad things," she said of the bill. "I do feel like it's retaliatory; that's a big issue."

The renewed legislative broadside occurs in the aftermath of the unions’ betrayal of the “teacher rebellions” in West Virginia and across the US, most recently in Los Angeles. It underscores the fact that last year’s nine-day strike, which was abruptly shut down by the state affiliates of the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), resolved none of the problems facing West Virginia teachers.

The deal the unions reached in 2018 with Republican Governor Jim Justice, a billionaire coal baron, and the state legislature ignored teachers’ demands for substantial increases in pay and school funding and an end to crushing out-of-pocket health care costs due to chronic underfunding of the state’s Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA).

After forcing the shutdown of the powerful strike on the terms dictated by Justice (the wealthiest man in the state), the unions took seats with state politicians and the insurance executives on a PEIA task force designed to cover up the criminal lack of funding for state employees’ healthcare. In a midterm election ploy last October, the Democrat-turned-Republican governor then promised teachers a paltry five percent pay raise.

Now, with educators’ salaries still hovering at about 48th in the nation, the omnibus bill seeks to tie that grossly inadequate five percent increase and a similarly inadequate $150 million payment into PEIA to measures designed to privatize West Virginia schools.

On Tuesday, Justice announced that he would veto

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the omnibus bill, stating he is opposed to the charter schools provision while calling for other portions of the bill to be voted on individually. Observers say that the legislature could override his veto. Regardless, Justice indicated that everyone involved needed to keep "an open mind" on education "reform," giving a nod to possible privatization deals.

Determined above all to maintain their income flow in the aftermath of the US Supreme Court decision in *Janus v. AFSCME*, the unions have enthusiastically solidarized themselves with the billionaire governor. Justice has signaled his opposition to the "payroll protection" clause, making it known he wants to continue partnering with the unions in suppressing the struggles of teachers in the state, as he did last year.

In a joint statement, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and AFT-WV president Fred Albert heaped praise on the governor. "We applaud Gov. Justice on his declaration today that he would veto it and insist on that which he and state Sen. Mitch Carmichael promised before the November election: a bill that fulfills the goal of a 5 percent wage increase and adequate health funding," they said.

Justice was cheered on by local AFT and NEA representatives who stood in applause after his press conference. Dale Lee, president of the West Virginia Education Association, added that he was "thrilled" with Justice's remarks while, not to be outdone, the AFT-WV president called the governor "wise." Albert translated his praise into action, opposing Mingo County's one-day protest. Addressing about 300 Kanawha County school employees, he called such a walkout "playing into [Republican Senator] Mitch Carmichael's bait."

The AFT and NEA embrace the scoundrel Justice because they seek nothing so much as "input in the process" and a seat at the table. As they shut down strikes and isolated workers throughout 2018, the unions called every struggle a "victory" and preached turning out support for Democratic politicians with the slogan "Remember in November."

With an even more drastic assault pending on public education, Weingarten and Albert—far from mobilizing the working class to fight—are instead recycling this directive, demanding the subordination of every struggle to the two parties of big business and what they claim is "affordable." The AFT joint statement makes this clear: "Last year, educators said they would 'remember in November' — and we will again be organizing to thwart those lawmakers who defy the will of their own constituents by supporting such a retaliatory bill."

Teachers must reject this defeatist outlook. The unions have demonstrated at every turn that their sole interest is in preserving their dues income and associated corporate perks. They cannot be "made to fight" in defense of teachers' jobs, salaries and benefits because their interests are diametrically opposed to those of school workers. They are not "unifiers" but strikebreakers and have shown that in exchange for a dues franchise, they will embrace the continued defunding of education including charter schools and privatization.

The betrayal of 2018—the fraudulent PEIA task force, failed promises, continued poverty wages and the deepening assault of education—demonstrates that new organizations and a new political perspective are needed. The intransigence of the political establishment has proved a valuable lesson for teachers. They confront powerful corporate interests that control both parties. They cannot fight these forces alone or on a state-by-state basis.

New rank and file organizations must be built that are independent of both the unions and the Democrats and Republicans. They must be international—reaching out to educators that are on the march in Berlin, on the streets of Paris, in India and across the US. The defense of the social right to free, high-quality public education falls to the working class and requires nothing less than a frontal assault on the capitalist economic system.

To take up this fight, the *WSWS Teachers Newsletter* urges educators everywhere to form independent rank-and-file committees of teachers, parents, and students to link up their struggles with workers across the globe and advance a socialist solution.

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