

West Virginia teachers battle legislative “education reform”

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This week, West Virginia public school teachers and staff are voting on possible actions against an “omnibus” education bill which attacks teachers and seeks major inroads at privatizing education in the state.

The “Comprehensive Education Reform” legislation, Senate Bill 451, was approved by the Republican-led Senate yesterday and now goes to the House of Delegates. It is an escalation of the attacks on public education pursued over decades by Democrats and Republicans, as well as a reaction of religious and business interests to the nine-day strike that shook the state a year ago.

The three school workers’ unions—the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), WV School Service Personnel Association (WVSSPA), and the state section of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT-WV)—are polling their membership for authorization “to call a statewide work action” should “circumstances... merit such a work stoppage.” The poll stipulates that the union leadership should “determine the appropriate time for that action to take place.”

Fearing a repeat of the independently-organized upsurge among educators that occurred last February, the school workers’ unions are now trying to get out in front, the better to suppress a struggle. For this reason, they held a press conference and announced the balloting. But they were also quick to hedge even on this tepid measure. AFT-WV President Fred Albert’s “special assistant” Kris Mallory told the *Gazette-Mail* that, in the paper’s words, “ballots requesting authorization for statewide action might not be sent out, saying he saw prospects for the bill’s passage as dim.”

Similarly, WVSSPA Executive Director Joe White told reporters last Friday that the unions would not name a “trigger” for a strike. “The biggest issue is we feel each item of this bill should stand on its own merit. The omnibus bill is not the best way to go,” he said. WVEA President Dale Lee added that he hoped the legislature “does the right thing.” Most explicit of all was AFT-WV President Fred Albert who told school employees last week, “if you walk out tomorrow, you’re playing into [SB 451’s sponsor, Republican] Mitch Carmichael’s bait. He’s baiting us to do that so he can turn that against us. I believe that with everything in me.”

The West Virginia teachers’ strike, which helped spur a series of walkouts across the US, began when southern coal county teachers defied their unions and struck. Repeatedly instructed to return to work, teachers remained intransigent and expanded their strike statewide for nearly two weeks. Without independent rank-and-file organizations of their own, however, teachers faced a political

impasse. The unions wore down the workers, regained control and terminated the walkout.

Promptly describing the forced return to work as a “victory,” the unions hailed the pledge by billionaire governor Jim Justice and state legislators for a measly 5 percent pay raise and a task force to investigate measures to “fix” the state’s cash-strapped Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA). Throughout, the *World Socialist Web Site* emphasized that teachers could place no trust in the assurances of the unions and big business politicians.

These warnings have been confirmed. In fact, not only is PEIA not “fixed” and teachers still impoverished, but the attacks on public education have intensified. SB 451, sponsored by Republican Senate President Mitch Carmichael, lashes a promised additional 5 percent pay raise to a raft of policies long sought after by sections of the ruling class. Similar measures are being debated in Oklahoma and Arizona, other states that saw teacher strikes last year.

SB 451 would introduce charter schools into the state. “Education savings accounts” (ESAs) would hive off funding for public schools into homeschooling, online, private, and religious schools, and tutoring companies who “shall be given maximum freedom to provide for the educational needs of ESA students without governmental control.” Class sizes would increase from 28 to 31. Teachers and other school staff would no longer have tenure and seniority rights, and would have their pay docked for strike activity. SB 451 includes a “non-severability clause” that would scrap the entire bill, including the promised raises, should any part of the bill be rejected in the legislature or later overturned in court.

There is a domino effect inherent in the bill’s provisions. With long-term population decline and loss of better-paying jobs in coal, many West Virginia communities now have schools at less than their official capacity. Districts are incentivized by the lack of funding to consolidate. SB 451’s rise in class sizes would propel an increase in the student-teacher ratio.

With consolidations, districts reduce staff. Teachers with more tenure—who have higher pay and more healthcare costs associated with being older—can be laid off. Younger, poorly paid teachers are saddled with more students. Already struggling students are expected to perform well on standardized tests, and when they do not, schools are punished with funding cuts.

Charter operations can then open up shop—often acquiring former public school buildings for a song—and selectively siphon off

students from the public schools. The bill explicitly stipulates that school boards must “make facilities available to the charter school that are either not used in whole or in part for classroom instruction at the time the charter school seeks to use or lease the public facility.” Moreover, charters “shall be exempt from all statutes and administrative regulations applicable to the state board, the county board or school unless expressly stated otherwise,” the bill states.

The public is overwhelmingly opposed to the bill, with local media tabulating opposition ranging from 75 to 95 percent in informal polls. Testimony from the Senate floor on February 1 indicated that “public calls and comments to senators were running as much as 3,000-to-one against the bill,” the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* noted.

Teachers and school staff are most vocally opposed. Contingents of teachers sat in the Capitol gallery during last week’s sessions, wearing red shirts and providing live updates on the proceedings on social media.

Teachers have widely expressed the sentiment that the 5 percent raise was not worth what the bill would do to the children. Schools are in dire straits, and teachers are on the front line of the social crisis. West Virginia is in the midst of the worst drug epidemic the country has ever seen, and thousands of children are in foster care, living precariously with relatives, orphaned from overdoses, and are suffering the effects of emotional trauma or neonatal abstinence syndrome from birth. In spite of these devastating problems, the state outlays 11 percent less in per-pupil funding now than before the economic crisis of 2008.

“Please help us protect children from this terrible bill,” teacher Frances Tolley wrote on social media. “Carmichael has this set to play both ways. If we say nothing, we are greedy, don’t care about kids. If we throw a fit, we deserve no raise. I’m proud of my fellow teachers. In spite of the prospect of an increase in pay that could help us, our ethics cannot be purchased.”

Lisa Collins, a teacher at Baileysville Elementary and Middle School, told Pineville media WVNS that she was worried about increasing the already large class sizes. “It is harder to reach all those students when they’re crammed in a classroom. There’s no room to breathe, and we’ve had those crowded classrooms, and it’s really not fair to the kids.”

At the Logan County Board of Education meeting Thursday night, special education teacher Leah Clay-Stone compared the impact of SB 451 to Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury’s famous novel about book-burning and suppression of dissent. “Are we on our way to our own dystopia?” she asked.

The role of fake “socialist” groups like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the International Socialist Organization, Labor Notes, and their “grassroots” amalgamations—all of which hailed last year’s struggle as a “historic victory”—operate as a secondary layer of union representatives, trying to give a “radical” flair to the treachery of the corporate-control unions. The DSA-affiliated *Jacobin* magazine has rolled out the same figures—Jay O’Neal and Emily Comer and WVEA Mingo County President Brandon Wolford—as official spokespersons for the teachers ahead of potential labor unrest.

Although educators now face an existential threat to public

schools in the state, Comer—in a combination of deceit and complacency—claims, “After what we accomplished last year, we’re aware of our power. So there’s no way we’re going to let the horrors of this bill be forced upon us, our students, or our state. We’re going to organize, we’re going to take action—and we’re going to win.” “Organize, action, win”—this empty rhetoric, without the slightest oppositional policy, serves to cover up for unions’ sabotage of the struggle.

Jacobin suggests that this time around in West Virginia, workers can model themselves upon the “insurgency” of Democratic Party stooges like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The last time, they and their pseudo-socialist friends were promoting right-wing militarist (and former Trump supporter) Democrat Richard Ojeda. “Firebrand state senator Richard Ojeda in particular is widely regarded as a hero by West Virginia workers,” breathlessly wrote Eric Blanc in *Socialist Worker* last year. The “hero” of the betrayed strike, Ojeda, is presently little heard-from as he resigned his seat to pursue greener pastures, seeking the Democratic Party’s presidential nod. Billionaire Republican Governor Jim Justice promptly filled his seat with a lobbyist for the coal, tobacco and pharmaceutical companies.

None of these experiences have been lived in vain. Lessons are being drawn. The unions and their fake socialist apologists have been shown to be bitter opponents of teachers and school workers. This was just as true in the recent Los Angeles teachers’ strike in Democratic-dominated California as it was in West Virginia. The war on education waged by both the Democrats and Republicans is turning new layers of workers and young people to the fight against capitalism. The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* calls on teachers to contact us to initiate discussion on building new, independent rank and file committees of teachers, students and workers to lead this fight in defense of public education and all the social rights of the working class.

The author recommends:

DSA covers for unions and Democrats in new book on walkout by West Virginia teachers

[18 October 2018]

How the UTLA orchestrated the betrayal of Los Angeles teachers

[24 January 2019]



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