West Virginia teachers, school staff vote “overwhelmingly” to authorize work action

Our reporters
11 February 2019

Teachers and other school workers in all 55 West Virginia counties voted last week to call a work action against a reactionary omnibus education bill moving through the legislature.

Union leaders tallied the votes Saturday, February 9, announcing “overwhelming” approval for a strike or other unspecified protest. American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) President Fred Albert said that the “work action” could mean anything “from picketing at schools to work stoppages.” He also refused to give a deadline.

The West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), AFT-WV and the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association called the statewide vote in a desperate maneuver to get out in front of the anger of teachers and keep the union apparatus in control. This was made particularly clear when, in their remarks to news media Saturday, Albert, WVEA President Dale Lee, and service personnel head Joe White characterized the vote to authorize action not as a mandate to mobilize the broadest possible strike action, but as a “big vote of confidence” in the unions. Lee echoed the sentiment, declaring, “We have an overwhelming vote of confidence to the leadership to do what we have to do.”

The threat of renewed strike action comes nearly a year after the nine-day strike which was sparked by the determined wildcat action of teachers and school workers in the southern coal counties. The wildcats, in defiance of the unions, spread the strike statewide and galvanized subsequent teacher walkouts across the US. It took nearly two weeks for the unions to regain control of the West Virginia strike, even with the intervention of the national AFT and National Education Association (NEA) leaderships. The unions eventually forced a return to work on terms which failed all of the teachers’ essential demands.

Increasingly angry over the failure of the legislature to fully fund their healthcare or provide adequate funding for classrooms and with many disillusioned with the unions, teachers in the state are now livid over Senate Bill 451. The pro-privatization bill ties promised raises and insurance changes to charter schools, vouchers and anti-strike measures.

Some local boards of education have also registered their opposition to the measures and signaled they would support a teacher strike. “There is strength in numbers,” said Allan Stiltner, Wyoming County board of education vice president Saturday. “Whatever you guys decide to do, we’re behind you 100 percent.” Wyoming is one of the southern coal counties where independent teacher walkouts began last year’s walkout.

SB 451 was approved by the House Education Committee with a 15-10 margin Friday evening, including some changes from previous iterations. Among them was the removal of the “education savings accounts” that would hive money off from public districts into vouchers for private and religious schools. The Education Committee also recommended placing a limit on the number of charter schools that could open in the state—but still introduces the scourge of unregulated, for-profit schools into West Virginia.

Union leaders continue to preach writing and calling state legislators, subordinating the demands of teachers and students to the big business Democrats and Republicans and the Wall Street interest they represent. WVEA head Lee claimed progress was being made, suggesting SB 451 was now “a better bill, but many things could still happen to it.”

A teacher’s aide told the World Socialist Web Site she was most concerned about the bill’s provision for

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the creation of charter schools to be set up by “just anyone” and staffed with teachers without educational qualifications. “I don’t want the bill to be passed. We don’t have any charter schools here in West Virginia,” she said, adding that she would not want her children going to a charter school. She said it was encouraging to hear about teachers in other states and other countries fighting back.

As a teacher’s aide, she works with students in wheelchairs and some with severe disabilities, often unable to communicate what hurts them or why they are upset. “That can be kind of stressful [but] I love my students.”

Another of the bill’s provisions is the elimination of job seniority. “I’ve been full-time for three years, but they can take my job and give it to somebody who just came in,” she said. “I don’t think they should take seniority away.”

Also speaking the WSWS, a Kanawha County school bus driver said she’s concerned about losing seniority and the untenable cost of health insurance. “I make less than $27,000 a year,” she said. “I have children.” She was adamant that elected officials needed to keep their promises. “We are going to do what we have to do to get them to do what they said they were going to do,” she said. “We are going to make sure they give us what they said they would give us.”

“The charter gets to cherry pick which students they want,” Fairmont Senior High School Choral Director Greg DeVito told the WV News. “Of course, they’re going to pick the kids with the highest GPAs and the highest test scores. … If you’re not picking up a subject very well, on top of having a teacher who is knowledgeable and certified, you rely on your peers who get it …

“Now, take those kids who get it and remove them from the equation. Those public schools that are left are going to perform even worse, because their best students who helped them get a boost are gone and there are no students in the room who are able to lean over and help a buddy.”

“The nepotism that could be involved when you don’t take into consideration someone’s seniority could be catastrophic,” said Wendy Dillon, a teacher at Farmington Middle School, also speaking to the WV News. “I couldn’t imagine that being public law.”

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