

“They’ll tell you one thing and turn around and do another”

West Virginia teachers denounce attack on public education

Our reporters
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Teachers across West Virginia walked out of their classrooms on Monday in a strike against a bill circulating in the state legislature that would divert funding from public schools.

Leaders of the state trade unions focused their opposition on the Republican-sponsored Senate Bill 451, which would create seven charter schools in the state and create a voucher program to finance private schools.

The unions had called for support for a version of the bill different in degree, but not kind, pushed by Democrats in the state House. This would also have opened the door to charter schools, but not vouchers and some other measures. Both versions would provide a paltry five percent raise to teachers while disregarding spiraling health care costs, large class sizes and decrepit facilities.

Whether sponsored by Republicans or Democrats, the bills are overwhelmingly opposed by West Virginia teachers, who last year waged a nine-day statewide strike that coalesced out of wildcat walkouts.

Last year’s struggle of West Virginia teachers was betrayed by the trade unions, which sent teachers back to work with bogus promises of legislative reforms to benefit public education. Instead, as the bills circulating in the state legislature show, the ending of that strike only bought time for politicians of both parties to launch new attacks.

World Socialist Web Site Teachers Newsletter reporters spoke to striking teachers who gathered in Charleston, the state capital.

Sandy, a service employee, said she was participating “to fight this bill. I feel bad for the community and bad for the kids. My dad lives in Florida, where they have

charter schools, and he said it drained the economy so much. Our economy is already drained here in West Virginia.”

Sandy said the introduction of charter schools would affect service employees. “They are also going after our seniority. We don’t know what’s going on with the health insurance right now. And after this blow, we don’t know what to think, what to trust. You know they are supposed to be fixing PEIA [the public employees health insurance program]. They’ve been doing it for a while, and so far we’ve heard they haven’t done anything with it.”

When asked what she thought about last year’s settlement, she said, “I don’t think we should have stopped. I really don’t. I was really disappointed that we did. I don’t think we should have given in as quickly as we did. Because it’s been like this the whole time. They’ll tell you one thing and turn around and do another thing.”

When the WSWs reporter raised the need for a general strike, Sandy said, “I think that’s what it’s going to come to. Teachers are so underpaid. They work in a high stress job.”

Darlene is a teacher from Mingo county. “The 150 million dollars for the rainy-day fund is for all state employees,” she said. “That’s not going to last very long. It’s a band-aid. This is retaliation for us going on strike last year!” She also made the point that if PEIA was fixed, teachers would receive an additional \$400 a month—an amount substantially higher than any pay raise they would receive.

A substitute teacher also referred to the bill as “payback” for the 2018 strike. “How do you think charter schools are going to work in a rural state like

this?,” he asked. “What’s going to happen to the poor kids out in the country if they don’t get accepted? They’ll wind up on the train tracks walking with a hobo stick.”

A teacher who wished to remain anonymous spoke about the devastating effect of the opioid crisis on schools. “We have a huge percentage of kids without parents or grandparents about to enter our schools. Their trauma is so great they’ll have special needs. They won’t be able to learn otherwise. Our legislature has never once come down to see what that looks like. They’re just out of touch.”

“They say charter schools are about choice,” she continued. “It’s not about choice. It’s about siphoning off money. I look at the haves and have nots of my class. The charter schools supposedly offer all these field trips to students. You know who really deserves that? The kid in my class who has never seen an escalator before. Or the kid who was amazed to see a toilet that flushes. But those are never the kids who get it. I think if we’re going to offer a charter school it should go to the children in poverty.”

She then referred to the lack of access to culture for the working class and poor in the United States. “Poor people should be able to go to the theater, or see the ballet,” she said.

She discussed last year’s sellout deal imposed by the unions, which consisted of a paltry five percent pay increase. “We didn’t even get [five percent]. That is what we were promised last year, but that wasn’t what I brought home.”

She was also angered that the deal failed to address the problems of declining school funding, classroom sizes, or lack of access to quality educational resources. “It’s not really about the raise for us,” she said. “It’s about the kids.”

When asked if she and her coworkers were prepared to continue their strike, she responded, “Yes. We’re not the richest people on earth but we’ll do it as long as we need to.”



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