

Oakland, California teachers walk out as unions sabotage West Virginia strike

Jerry White**21 February 2019**

Three thousand teachers in Oakland, California began a strike at the end of class yesterday to demand increased pay and a reduction in class sizes. They are also opposing plans by the Democratic Party-controlled school board to slash funding and close as many as one-third of the schools in the district. The strike is the latest in a wave of strikes by educators against the bipartisan assault on teachers and public education.

The Oakland walkout began as unions sabotaged the two-day strike by 33,000 teachers and school employees in West Virginia. The West Virginia teachers walked out Tuesday to oppose legislation that would introduce the state's first ever charter schools. None of the issues that provoked their nine-day strike last year have been resolved.

During a press conference Wednesday night, the leaders of the West Virginia affiliates of the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) said they were sending teachers back to school Thursday because of a bipartisan effort to back Republican Governor Jim Justice's "clean" bill that would not tie a five percent pay raise to charter schools, school privatization or the requirement that unions get annual permission to deduct dues.

West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) President Dale Lee and AFT-WV President Fred Albert praised Justice, a billionaire coal baron, who has championed tax cuts for the energy industry that have bled the public schools and other state services dry. Justice's funding bill will do nothing to address miserably low teacher pay, chronically underfunded schools and impossibly high out-of-pocket health care costs, which triggered last year's walkout.

Aware of the deep opposition among teachers and fearful of a repeat of last year, when striking teachers revolted against union orders to return to work based on similar worthless promises, Lee and Albert claimed they

were only following the orders of their members to end the strike.

"We have been in touch with our members," Albert said. "Overwhelmingly they wanted Senate Bill 451 to be dead, and their work in the capitol was done... I have heard over and over, that I am going to act in their best behalf and that I would never do anything to betray their trust." Even as reporters asked about teachers in the coal mining areas such as Mingo County defying the order, Albert said hopefully, "As we came out united and strong, we need to go back united and strong."

The decision provoked a firestorm of anger from educators on social media, denouncing the sellout by the unions.

One teacher posted, "Apparently unions didn't learn their lesson last year!!!" Another said, "Now we just don't trust Mitch [Republican Senator Mitch Carmichael], but we don't trust you. Who needs legislation to kill the Union... You guys are doing a fine job on your own. Too much still wrong." Another said, "Our fight isn't over."

"I am reluctant to return to the classroom until this has been resolved to the satisfaction of the majority of educators," a substitute teacher at the state capitol in Charleston told the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*. "Justice could have issued the stand-alone bill weeks ago, but he failed to do so. Why? There is plenty of precedent for renegeing on promises and verbal commitments. I say hold the line. I am not getting paid during this work stoppage, but I truly believe it is the most appropriate action."

Since the revolt by West Virginia teachers in February 2018, the unions have done everything they can to block strikes. When they have been unable to prevent strikes, the unions have worked to isolate them. They are terrified that if two strikes occur at the same time, teachers will seize on the idea of a united struggle nationwide.

The unions withstood a three-day strike by Denver, Colorado teachers earlier this year after the United

Teachers Los Angeles shut down and sold out the six-day strike by 33,000 teachers in the nation's second largest school district. Denver was sold out before the West Virginia strike started. Now the unions are shutting down West Virginia on the eve of the strike in Oakland, where the Oakland Education Association has kept teachers on the job for more than a year without a contract.

The isolation of these strikes has only emboldened the ruling class. This was underscored by the release of a plan by Los Angeles School Superintendent Austin Beutner, a former investment banker backed by billionaire school privatizer Eli Broad, to break up the district into smaller units to facilitate the expansion of charter schools. Charter schools already siphon off \$600 million a year from traditional public schools in California.

The unions are not working class organizations, but instruments of the ruling class. They are aligned with the Democratic Party and are seeking only to get their own cut from the privatization of public education. AFT President Randi Weingarten and NEA President Lily Eskelsen-García are both in the top one-percent of income earners, making \$543,150 and \$414,824 a year, respectively.

Oakland teachers must draw the sharpest lessons from these experiences. If the struggle is not to be isolated and betrayed by the unions, rank-and-file teachers must take the conduct of the strike into their own hands.

The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* urges Oakland teachers to form rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the unions, in every school and community to mobilize the broadest support from students, parents and all workers throughout the Bay Area, California and beyond. Statewide strikes and a national walkout must be prepared to oppose the bipartisan attack on public education.

Oakland teachers have powerful allies in the tens of millions of working class people—in the factories, offices, public sector, Amazon and UPS warehouses, in the telecom, retail and service industries—who face the same enemies and the same fight. The logic of the developing class struggle is toward a general strike of all workers.

All over the world, opposition to austerity and social inequality is growing. Teachers who are committed to the future of the next generation have been in the forefront of the struggle, with strikes in recent days and weeks in Morocco and Berlin. These have been part of a growing eruption of class conflict, highlighted by the Yellow Vest protests in France and the upheaval of maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico.

There is a growing interest in socialism and recognition

of the bankruptcy of capitalism, which subordinates every aspect of life to private profit and has put more wealth in the hands of three billionaires—Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffet and Bill Gates—than the bottom 160 million people who live in the US.

Rank-and-file committees should formulate their own demands, which begin with the needs of teachers and their students, not what the corporate-controlled politicians, news media and union officials say is affordable.

Instead of squeezing working class families with more regressive taxes, education should be funded through a massive increase in taxes on the corporate and financial oligarchy, which has accumulated its unfathomable private fortunes at the expense of hundreds of millions of working people. The wealthiest two of California's 114 billionaires, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Larry Ellison of Oracle, could cover the budget of every K-12 school in California and still have \$20 billion each left over.

A genuine fight to defend public education will inevitably encounter the resistance of all those who defend the wealth and power of the corporate and financial elite, Democrats no less than Republicans. The growing movement of teachers and other sections of the working class must become the spearhead for the building of a political movement of the working class in opposition to both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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