

“Everybody needs to go on strike”

Charleston, West Virginia residents support teachers fighting to defend public education

Our reporters
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Teachers in West Virginia were back in classes this week after their second strike in less than a year was sabotaged by the unions, including the West Virginia Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers – West Virginia. The strike was called off in coordination with the national American Federation of Teachers to make sure that it would not overlap with the strike initiated by thousands of teachers in Oakland, California.

While the state legislature, which is controlled by the Republican Party, retreated on far-reaching attacks on public education, including the introduction of for-profit charter schools, this is only temporary. All of the basic issues for which teachers went on strike last year remain unresolved: underfunded schools, large class sizes, low wages and poor health insurance.

Republican State Senator Craig Blair, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, told *The Journal* that similar legislation would be considered in next year’s legislative session. “A year from now we will have had time enough for the public and our education community to digest what was in Senate Bill 451 and understand that it is a really advanced idea in the beginning for being able to allow the flexibility in the classrooms and a better education system,” Blair said.

A bill which provides for a five percent wage increase for teachers, part of “clean bill” supported by Republican Governor Jim Justice, a billionaire coal baron who campaigned for office as a Democrat, is making its way through the legislature after being passed by the House on Friday.

The pay raise is expected to be taken up by the Senate for a vote, even though Republican Senators have expressed opposition. “I always said I would vote for a

pay raise of 5 percent. I did it last year, and I did it this year already,” Blair told *The Journal*. “But I also have said publicly that if they went out on strike that I would not vote for a pay raise.”

Teachers and other public-school employees should have no faith in whatever backroom deals were cut between the unions and Justice. Even if the five percent wage increase is implemented, a first-year teacher in West Virginia will only make little more than \$32,000 per year. These limited wage increases will be eaten up by inflation and the rising cost of health insurance, which state employees receive through the critically underfunded Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA).

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to residents of Charleston, West Virginia about the strike and the connection between the fight to defend public education and the social crisis facing broader sections of the working class.

Michael Tucker is a school bus driver in Kanawha County, with four years on the job. “They say on the news that bus drivers make \$31,000 on average. I’d love to make that! I only get \$26,000 per year,” he said.

“As far as these bills going through at the capitol, I don’t trust the government in any way. They still haven’t fixed our PEIA, which is why we walked out last year. Right now, they’ve got zero substitute bus drivers in this district. If one of us gets sick, someone else has to work extra hours to get the kids where they need to go.”

Charlene, a disabled worker who uses an oxygen tank to breathe, said, “It’s not just the teachers that can’t afford health insurance. I just found out that I have to pay \$450 per month for my new insurance, and that’s

the cheapest one! How are people supposed to live?"

"It's not just the schools [that are in disrepair], it's the roads, it's everything," she added. "I can tell you, because I've got friends in there, that there's a prison in McDowell County that's got black mold, and they haven't had heat all last week. Those people were sentenced to do their time, and they're doing it, but they're human beings."

WSWS reporters asked Charlene who she thinks is responsible for the decrepit infrastructure in the US. "It's the whole government that's responsible," she said. "Especially this billionaire governor, and our president that we've got. They didn't get my vote!"

Teddy Smith is unemployed and looking for work at a local shopping center. "The teachers are trying to do their best, but they're not getting what they need to take care of the students."

WSWS reporters asked Teddy about the opioid addiction crisis plaguing West Virginia and other parts of the country. "It's pathetic. Kids deserve to be put first before these drugs [opioids], but the governor and all these politicians just want to put more money in their own pockets. They want the poor to stay poor and the rich to stay rich, and they don't care anything about these kids."

He continued, "I'm not a dad yet, but my fiancé and I have decided that we've got to move out of West Virginia when we want to start a family. If they want us to stay here, they've got to improve things, they've got to put more money into the schools, there's got to be good jobs, and get these opioids out of here!"

Claude is a certified welder and certified nursing assistant (CNA) who works in restaurants around Charleston. "Everybody needs to go on strike," he said. "That's the direction things are headed now. Who's in office to represent the people? Nobody in there represents the people who are living paycheck to paycheck, and some us aren't even making it between checks. I sometimes have to come to my friends for help. That's not good! I hate doing it, because they've got bills to pay, too. Everybody's struggling."

Claude remarked that he had noted a significant decline of the unions as organizations which represent and fight for the working class. "What unions?" he said. "What are they even doing? There's no union any more. And I know what they've done to coal miners here. My father was a coal miner for 55 years, raised 14

kids, Mom took care of the house, and we never saw a welfare check, we all graduated from high school.

"I took welding classes in school and got certified. Two weeks after I got certified, one of the biggest plants in Logan shut down and laid off 500 people. You go down to Logan right now, it's a ghost town."

His friend Robert who had been listening to the conversation concluded, "Without the people working, everything would go out of business. The working class, the working poor. That's what we are."



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