

The global struggle of teachers

Jerry White
26 February 2019

On almost every continent, teachers have come to the forefront of the struggle against government austerity and levels of social inequality not seen since the 1920s. Teachers have played a key role in the resurgence of the class struggle that broke out across the world in 2018 and has accelerated in the opening months of this year.

Three thousand teachers are currently on strike in Oakland, California in the latest in a series of teacher walkouts in the United States, involving 71,000 educators during the first eight weeks of 2019. The strike follows last month's walkout in Los Angeles, the nation's second largest school district, a strike in Denver, Colorado, and a two-day statewide walkout in West Virginia, where the strike a year ago sparked the largest rebellion of teachers across the US in decades.

Teachers and school workers accounted for 380,000 of the nearly half-million workers involved in work stoppages in the US last year, the largest number since 1986. There have been increasing calls for strikes in many states, including Oklahoma and Arizona, where statewide strikes took place last year.

In São Paulo, **Brazil**, the largest city in the Americas, teachers have gone on strike for the second time this year against pension cuts. In **Mexico**, teachers in Michoacán and Oaxaca struck and set up blockades earlier this month to fight layoffs and government-backed "school reform."

Earlier this month, teachers and child care workers struck in Berlin, **Germany**; educators in **Portugal** joined a general strike; teachers in **France** joined the Yellow Vest protests against the "President of the rich," Emanuel Macron; and more than 100,000 teachers from primary school to higher education are set to carry out the first national strike on March 15 in the **Netherlands**.

Teachers have also struck in **Morocco** and **Zimbabwe** amid growing opposition against the

reduced education budgets and school privatization throughout Africa, and tens of thousands of teachers in Tamil Nadu, in southern **India**, struck last month for improved pay and conditions.

This movement is being driven by record levels of social inequality throughout the world. The social counterrevolution, which was initiated by UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan four decades ago, was accelerated after the global financial crash of 2008. Capitalist governments, led by the Obama administration in the US, spent trillions to buy up the toxic assets of the banks and provide unlimited credit to re-inflate the stock markets and the private fortunes of the financial criminals. To pay for this, political parties of every stripe made "austerity" the watchword.

Two recent reports highlight the historic transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in the US since 2008.

A new research paper by Gabriel Zucman, an economics professor at the University of California, Berkeley, found that the share of total household wealth controlled by the top 0.1 percent richest adults was at the highest level since 1929, when this tiny elite hoarded 25 percent of the wealth. "US wealth concentration seems to have returned to levels last seen during the Roaring Twenties," wrote Zucman, who noted that it could be even higher because of the ability of the super-rich to hide their wealth in off-shore accounts.

A report by the US Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis found that employee pay and benefits as a percentage of gross domestic income fell to 52.7 percent in last year's third quarter, the fourth straight quarterly decline. Labor's share of domestic income has steadily declined since 1970, when it was 59 percent. It continues to be the lowest since the end of World War II. At the same time, the share of domestic income going to corporate profits has climbed

from less than 12 percent in the 1980s to more than 20 percent today.

The global economic crisis was also used by the financial elite to loot public assets and get its hands on the world “education market,” which will be worth an estimated \$10 trillion by 2030. A recent book pointed to the role of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, USAID, and the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) in funding school privatization schemes around the world.

In the US, the Obama administration, which found endless resources to bail out Wall Street, starved the public schools of resources and used the manufactured crisis to expand for-profit charter schools. By 2016, the latest date available, 25 of the 50 US states were still spending less per pupil than they did before the Great Recession, leaving a \$19 billion shortfall. The number of public-school employees today is 170,000 below pre-2008 levels, even though student enrollment has risen 1.5 million, and in 38 states, the average annual salary of teachers is lower than it was in 2009.

The universal character of the attack on teachers and public education and what underlies it raises a number of fundamental issues. First is the role of the unions throughout the world, which are opposed to any struggle because they are aligned with the capitalist parties and accept the entire framework of austerity and social inequality.

In Oakland, the union rejected demands by rank-and-file teachers to include opposition to budget cuts in the strike demands, even though the district plans to pay for any pay increases by slashing millions of dollars from educational services and closing schools. The Oakland Education Association is colluding with the state Democratic Party to reach a rotten deal that is entirely acceptable to the corporate and financial elite, and like previous strikes across the country, betrays the fight to defend the right to public education.

This is true of the unions throughout the world. In the face of the global attack on public education, jobs and living standards, the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions have collaborated with their respective governments and capitalist owners to lower labor costs and corporate taxes in order to make their “own” countries more competitive.

That is why the building of new organizations of struggle, controlled by workers themselves and

independent of the unions, is a burning question. Teachers must form rank-and-file committees, which base themselves on what teachers and students need, not what the powers-that-be say is affordable.

Teachers have won popular support because they are fighting for fundamental rights and because all workers are facing the same conditions—declining incomes and skyrocketing living costs, precarious employment and endless attacks on social rights, including health care and pensions—which were won over generations of struggle.

The developing movement among teachers is an initial expression of a rebellion that will inevitably extend into broader layers of the working class, particularly industrial workers in key sectors such as auto, steel and other areas of manufacturing. It is a movement that will be compelled to address not only the immediate questions of wages and working conditions, but the great issues that face workers in every country—social inequality, the shredding of democratic rights, the growth of authoritarian forms of rule and the mounting danger of catastrophic war.

Strikes alone cannot resolve what workers confront. The logic of the international resurgence of the class struggle is the necessity for the working class to fight to take political power in its own hands and reorganize the world economy on the basis of social need, not private profit.

Only by expropriating the financial aristocracy and carrying out the socialist reorganization of economic life can the vast wealth produced by the working class be used to raise the material and cultural level of the masses, guarantee a free and quality public education to all, and rid mankind of poverty, exploitation and war.

The premium is therefore on the building of a new, socialist and internationalist leadership that can make the working class conscious of this necessity. That is the fight being undertaken by the ICFI and its sections.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact