"We may walk out because we need drastic change"

Indiana teachers rally against low pay, attacks on public education

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On Saturday, more than a thousand Indiana teachers rallied in the state Capitol building in Indianapolis to oppose nearly two decades of declining teacher pay, cuts to public education and the growth of privatization. Like states across the country, there is growing support for a statewide walkout of teachers in Indiana, but the teachers unions and the political establishment are firmly opposed to any such actions.

The boiling over of teacher opposition in Indiana is part of a wave of teachers strikes throughout the United States and internationally against the attacks on public education and the growth of social inequality. In 2018, US teachers participated in major statewide strikes, starting with the wildcat strikes in West Virginia, which spread to Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky and other states. Since the beginning of the year, more than 75,000 teachers have carried out strikes or sickouts in Los Angeles, Denver, West Virginia, Oakland and Kentucky.

In each of these strikes, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates shut down the struggles without any of the fundamental issues being resolved. While each betrayal has been hailed as a "victory" by the unions and their supporters, educators in Oklahoma, Arizona and other states are discussing strike action again to confront abysmally low pay, growing classroom sizes, school privatization and other attacks on public education.

Teachers in Indiana confront conditions no less devastating. They face more than two decades of salary declines, low pay for new teachers, rising healthcare costs, overcrowded classrooms, broken down schools with elevated lead levels and widespread teacher attrition. In addition, state officials, including former Governor and now US Vice President Mike Pence and his successor Eric Holcomb, have expanded charter schools and voucher programs to divert scarce public school resources into private hands. Many Indiana teachers work more than two to three jobs to survive.

Despite teachers strikes being illegal in Indiana, as is the case in West Virginia and many other states, there has been a growing mood of militancy among teachers and support to join their fellow teachers across the US in a statewide strike.

Teachers came to Saturday's rally in Indianapolis hoping to find a strategy to fight. Instead, the event was dominated by demagogic speeches by the Indiana State Teachers Association (ISTA) president, Teresa Meredith, and the NEA vice president, Becky Pringle. Over the last year, Meredith and ISTA officials have been quite vocal in their opposition to any strike or statewide walkout of Indiana teachers.

"We are telling our folks our hope is to avoid a walkout," the ISTA president said, according to the *Chicago Tribune* last week. Meredith made clear that the rally was the first step towards "lobbying the legislature," i.e., begging for relief from the same corporate-controlled politicians that are waging a war on teachers and public education.

Both ISTA and the AFT-Indiana, which covers teachers in districts in the economically depressed areas of Northwest Indiana, including Democratic Party-run Gary, are opposed to any strike action. ISTA has more than 40,000 members in the state while the AFT-Indiana has 5,000. They have colluded with the austerity measures of successive Democratic and Republican administrations for decades as education funding and teacher salaries have declined.

Indiana teachers rank near the bottom of teacher pay nationally. From 2000 to 2017, Indiana teachers saw their pay fall by nearly 16 percent when adjusted for inflation. According to statistics compiled by the NEA, the average teacher in Indiana makes around $50,554 in 2017 (adjusted for inflation) while they made around $59,986 in 2000. According to *Indy Star*, the lowest paid teachers in 82 districts make less than $35,000 a year and in 110 other districts they make between $35,000 and $37,000 a year.

According to a report that came out last year by the Indiana University Center, Indiana ranks last in per-student funding. In the 2017–2018 year, funding per student amounted to $6,673, with the national average around $11,934. With inflation factored in, teacher pay in Indiana has not recovered since the financial crisis of 2008–2009. In 2009–2010, K–12 education funding was around $8.46 billion. In 2018, it was about $9.45 billion, but when adjusted for inflation is actually lower than spending from 2009–2010. States across the country cut

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education spending dramatically after the 2008 financial crash. While the Obama administration bailed out Wall Street, hundred of thousands of teachers were laid off.

Charter schools have proliferated across the state since 2011 with more than 93 schools that enroll more than 44,000 students. Indiana also has one of the largest private school voucher programs, ranked 46th out of 50 states in the US. The state has been a center of school privatization efforts with the support of both Democrats and Republicans.

The Republican-controlled state legislature and Governor Holcomb are currently proposing education budgets for the next two years that will do nothing to address the crisis in education in Indiana, even as the government has $1.9 billion in reserve funds. The state House proposed to increase K–12 education spending by a meager $461 million through 2021. The House also proposes to allocate a one-time $150 million payment from the state's reserve funds to pay for pensions of teachers hired after 1996, supposedly to free up local school districts who currently pay pensions out of their budgets. Governor Holcomb proposes an even lower spending plan of $432 million through 2021 and $140 million in a one-time payment for pensions.

Both proposals by the House and the governor are meant to force local districts to fund minuscule teacher raises through enacting budget cuts, including to administrators and to other school workers. Local districts will be forced to make cuts to transportation and food service to meet requirements for 85 percent of school district funding going to teacher pay.

Holcomb told the *Tribune-Star*, "I hope they don't walk out," and offered to make a deal with the teacher unions. At the rally, ISTA President Meredith told the crowd, "Well I'd say, governor, come closer. We must make more significant strides."

While Meredith urged teachers to put their faith in such a deal, many teachers shouted "strike!" and "walkout!" at the rally. So fearful are the union officials of such a development that union officials, including Meredith, did everything they could Saturday to try to prevent reporters from the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* from speaking to teachers about building rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and uniting with the growing struggles of teachers around the US and the world.

Nevertheless many teachers expressed their views about the conditions they face. Michelle, a teacher from southern Indiana, said, "I'm a single mom with two kids and have a master's degree. I qualify for free and reduced lunches for my kids and have to work a second job at a restaurant for the extra money. I've been teaching eight years and make $42,000."

"My health insurance has gone up," Michelle continued. "I pay more than $550 a month and it is increasing every year. I'm getting less now than I did two years ago. I also have student loans I pay every month with $33,000 in debt. Teachers are in poverty. My friend who has been teaching as an aide for 16 years makes $11 an hour. Nobody wants to be a teacher anymore. You get to a point where you don't have any more choice because it comes to survival. We may have to walk out because we need drastic change."

Like the union executives around the country, Teresa Meredith, who made more than $221,000 in total compensation from ISTA in 2017 (nearly six times the salary of the lowest paid Indiana teachers), functions as a tool of the corporate and political establishment. NEA Vice President Becky Pringle makes $371,000 in total compensation. For their services in stifling teacher opposition, the heads of the teachers unions are paid handsomely and are in the top 1 to 5 percent of income earners.

Teachers should put no faith in the ISTA or the Democratic Party, which has also overseen attacks on public education in Indiana over the last two decades. Fearing a movement from below, Democrats like Tim Skinner have made comments about supporting a strike. But the Democrats are just a much enemies of public education and teachers as the Republicans.

While teachers and other workers are told there is no money for education, the political establishment and the corporations continue to enrich themselves at the expense of the working class. As one teacher from Indianapolis pointed out, both parties found over $600 million to subsidize the building of the Lucas Oil sports stadium for the owners of the professional football team, the Indianapolis Colts.

To fight for their interests, Indiana teachers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to fight for what teachers and their students need, not what the corporate-controlled parties and the unions say is affordable. Indiana teachers should prepare a statewide strike and link up with teachers across the US to prepare a nationwide strike of teachers and workers to defend public education and oppose austerity and social inequality.

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