

As teacher anger explodes across US

How to fight for public education in Indiana

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Teachers, students and workers converging today in Indianapolis are part of a growing movement throughout the US and internationally against government austerity and social inequality.

This week, one million Argentinian teachers walked out for three days, and tens of thousands of teachers refused a back to work order in Ivory Coast. Ninety thousand Mexican educators are striking, and 300,000 Colombian teachers are set to walk out March 19. Teachers throughout the US have engaged in strike action or are discussing strike action, including in Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, and Fremont, California; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and in the states of Oklahoma, Arizona, Alaska, South Carolina, West Virginia and Kentucky.

This is one fight, the world over. On one side are hundreds of millions of workers and young people. On the other side is a tiny oligarchy of billionaires who are demanding the destruction of public education, healthcare, and pensions.

In Indiana as in other states, teachers are fighting for better pay, school funding and against the ceaseless expansion of charter schools. Teachers in the state rank near the bottom of the national scale for teacher pay, which has declined more than 15 percent over the last 15 years.

Indiana lawmakers recently rejected a proposal to raise starting pay to \$40,000 for teachers statewide. *IndyStar* reports that in 82 districts, the lowest-paid full-time teacher makes less than \$35,000 a year, and in another 110 districts the minimum teacher salary is between \$35,000 and \$37,000 per year.

Indiana schools have been starved of funds for more than ten years. In the years since 2008, school funding has been increased by an infinitesimal 0.11 percent (adjusted for inflation), according to the Center on

Budget and Policy Priorities. Last year, Indiana tested 915 schools and found that 61 percent had one or more fixtures with elevated lead levels.

A recent budget draft promises to increase the amount that Indiana spends on schools overall by \$461 million—or 4.3 percent—through 2021. In line with Governor Eric Holcomb's requests, the state would also make a one-time payment of \$150 million from state reserves that would pay down a pension liability for schools. This will do nothing to address the deep-going crisis of public education in the state.

Charter school expansion has driven down teacher pay and conditions as public education has become a lucrative investment vehicle, at the direct expense of students, teachers and entire working class. In 2011, the state of Indiana took the lead in the expansion of charters and implemented the broadest school voucher program in the US. Today, 44,000 Indiana students are enrolled in charter schools. Nearly half of students (43 percent) in Gary are enrolled in charter schools.

Teachers are determined to defend public education, and there is mass support in the working class for high-quality public education and well-compensated teachers.

It does not take a rocket scientist to know what the facts are: educators need good wages and benefits in order to cope with rising housing, health care and other living expenses. They need a substantial increase in school funding to make class sizes smaller, hire more nurses, counselors and special education teachers and adequately supply their classrooms. Educators need increased social services to address chronic poverty, homelessness and other social ills that afflict their students.

The entire corporate and political establishment insists there is no money for any of these basic

necessities. While Indiana is currently controlled by Republicans, teachers in states controlled by Democrats face the same issues. In California, which is run by Democrats from the Governor's mansion to local school boards, teachers are entering struggle over wages, health care and the destruction of public education in favor of charter schools.

Many of the "school choice" programs enacted in Indiana since 2000 have been passed by Democratic legislatures or signed by Democratic governors.

Moreover, the Obama administration's education "reform"—including the aggressive promotion of charter schools and laying off of hundreds of thousands of educators—has paved the way for the vicious policies of the Trump administration.

As for the teachers' unions—including the National Education Association, the parent organization of the Indiana State Teachers Association (ISTA)—their role in the expanding wave of teachers struggles has been to isolate every strike, shut it down on the basis of a rotten agreement, and block a united movement of all teachers, students and workers in defense of public education. In Indiana, ISTA has overseen the attacks on pay and teaching and learning conditions.

The latest operation by the unions has come in Oakland, where the Oakland Education Association (OEA) rammed through an agreement over widespread opposition last weekend to end a powerful strike by teachers. The deal meets none of the teachers' main demands and was premised on tens of millions of dollars in budget cuts, which are now being implemented.

Teachers need a new way forward in the fight to defend public education.

Teachers in Indiana should link up their struggles with those of educators all over the US and around the world. The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* calls for the formation of rank-and-file strike committees in every school and community to mobilize the broadest support from students, parents and workers in industrial, service, and healthcare for statewide and national action. An independent leadership of teachers, students and other workers can lead a political general strike in defense of education.

Teachers can fight for what educators and their students need, not what big business politicians and union bureaucrats say is affordable. The securing of the

funding necessary for a vast improvement of public education and teachers' living standards requires an assault on the power and personal fortunes of the super-rich. But this fight will not be conducted by ISTA, or any teachers union, who are tied to the Democratic Party and the interests of big business. It must be taken up by workers themselves.

An improvement of conditions for working people, whose collective labor produces all of society's wealth, is only possible through a frontal assault on the corporate and financial oligarchy, the seizure of their fortunes and a radical redistribution of wealth. Tens of millions of workers and young people are opposed to inequality, militarism, anti-immigrant attacks, police brutality and other forms of state repression and there is a growing support for socialism in the US and around the world.

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