

# **Year after Arizona strike, teacher walkouts and protests spread in US**

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Thousands of teachers and their supporters are expected to attend protests in the state capitals of North Carolina (Raleigh) and South Carolina (Columbia) on Wednesday, May 1 to demand increases in wages and school funding, the hiring of more staff and other improvements for their students.

The protests in the Carolinas, which take place a year after nearly 60,000 Arizona teachers struck, are part of the wave of strikes and demonstrations by educators in the US and internationally that began in 2018 and are continuing this year.

More than 300,000 Polish teachers returned to classrooms this week after carrying out a 17-day nationwide strike, their first in decades, to demand a 30 percent wage increase. Teachers won enormous popular support. Some 40,000 social workers were set to join the walkout before the main teachers union, ZNP, capitulated to the ultra-right Law and Justice Party government and called off the strike without meeting the teachers' demands.

In the North African country of Morocco, thousands of low-paid contract teachers staged an overnight demonstration in front of the parliament building in the capital city of Rabat on April 24 and 25 before security forces used water cannons and batons to disperse them, leaving over 70 injured. The largely young teachers have carried out months of strikes and demonstrations to demand the replacement of their renewable contracts with permanent jobs, along with pensions and benefits commensurate with other public sector workers.

According to reports, protests by North Carolina's teachers will cancel classes for half of the state's 1.53 million public school students. Last May, 20,000 teachers rallied in the Capitol, but the meager increases approved by the state's Democratic governor and Republican-controlled legislature still leave their pay

well below the national average. The state is 39th in the nation in per pupil spending.

South Carolina teachers are demanding a 10 percent salary increase, smaller class sizes and uninterrupted planning time. They have denounced the "insufferable and oppressive working conditions" endured by teachers whose starting pay is \$32,000, not much more than the federal poverty threshold of \$25,750 for a family of four.

In addition to these protests, thousands of other teachers are preparing strikes and demonstrations in several US cities.

- In Chicago, City College clerks and technical workers are set to strike Wednesday, May 1, if no agreement is reached for workers who have not had a contract in three years. Another 130 teachers at five charter schools could strike at the end of the school day Wednesday, with teachers at another five charters possibly joining the strike. The labor agreement covering more than 20,000 Chicago Public Schools teachers expires on June 30.

- In New York City, thousands of pre-kindergarten teachers are set to strike on Thursday, May 2, to demand higher wages. The pre-school teachers are in a fight against Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, who has contracted out early childhood programs to privately run "community-based organizations," which pay teachers substantially less than their public-school counterparts.

- In Detroit, teachers are planning to protest the May 14 school board meeting to oppose the addition of five unpaid days to their 2019–2020 school calendar and district plans to implement a merit pay system. In 2016, hundreds of Detroit teachers launched a series of wildcat "sickouts" in defiance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, which brought to national attention the

horrific conditions in the schools, including black mold, rodents and crumbling infrastructure.

- In Mississippi, 66 percent of teachers polled by the Mississippi Association of Educators said they would participate in a one-day statewide sickout, and nearly 40 percent said they would join an indefinite strike to improve wages and classroom conditions. One teacher, responding to threats to use anti-strike laws, said, “What’s worse? Breaking a tyrannical law to hopefully improve our situation or sitting back and doing nothing while politicians continue to make our jobs more and more impossible?”

- In Arizona, a year after tens of thousands of educators conducted a statewide rebellion, teachers are considering action again because the deal signed by the Arizona Education Association with the Republican Governor Doug Ducey failed to address their concerns.

- Anger is growing in the state of Washington, where teachers held a series of strikes in September 2018 that were isolated and defeated by the unions. With school districts preparing mass layoffs and budget cuts, the Democratic Party-controlled state legislature passed a budget Sunday that provides a one-time infusion of cash and lifts the cap on regressive local property taxes. While shifting the tax burden onto the backs of working- and middle-class people, Democratic Governor Jay Inslee handed the largest tax cut in history—\$8.7 billion—to aircraft giant Boeing, while Washington-based Amazon, owned by the world’s richest man, paid \$0 in federal taxes on \$11 billion in profits last year.

In every country, teachers are fighting the consequences of the sharp increase in social inequality that followed the global financial crash of 2008 and subsequent bailout of the banks and stock markets. In the US, 24 states were spending less on K-12 school funding when President Obama left office in 2016 than they were before the crash. State funding for higher education also declined in 41 states between 2008 and 2015.

While most states modestly increased funding over the last three years, 12 states actually cut funding last year by at least seven percent, according to the Center of Budget and Policy Priorities. Teacher strikes in four of these states—West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma and North Carolina—forced a modest increase in school funding. However, these were financed through

temporary fixes, including regressive taxes or cuts to other vital social programs, which did not impinge on the wealth of America’s corporate and financial aristocracy.

The biggest obstacles to unifying educators across the country have been the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state and local affiliates. Union officials peddle the lie that the Democrats, who are no less enemies of teachers and public education than Trump, Betsy DeVos and the Republicans, will listen to and address teachers’ demands.

Referring to efforts to elect more Democrats to the North Carolina legislature, the president of the North Carolina Association of Educators Mark Jewell said Governor Roy Cooper, a Democrat, “can override the anti-public education legislation that may come forward” and “Democrats and Republicans would have to sit down and negotiate.”

Allied with the Democrats and led by union executives whose six-digit incomes put them in the top five percent of income earners, the unions are opposed to the development of a movement of the working class that would challenge the entrenched power of the super-rich and fight for a sweeping redistribution of wealth.

Teachers must draw the lessons of the last year of struggle, which was largely initiated from below by union and non-union teachers in defiance of the NEA and AFT. New organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by rank-and-file educators themselves, including workplace and neighborhood committees, must be built to fight for what teachers, support staff and their children need, not what the big business politicians claim is affordable.

The fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class, including mass demonstrations and a general strike to defend the social right to high quality public education, must be combined with a political struggle for a socialist alternative to the capitalist system.



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