The teachers' revolt and the fight for social equality

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Thousands of educators across North and South Carolina are converging on the state capitals today demanding better pay, improved working conditions and better social conditions for their students. Teachers in the Carolinas are joining a worldwide movement of educators who are saying "Enough is enough" to low wages, overcrowded classrooms and politicians who piously declare their devotion to children while slashing public education to the bone.

A year ago, 60,000 Arizona teachers carried out their first-ever statewide strike as part of a revolt that spread from West Virginia and Oklahoma to Kentucky and Virginia. Walkouts have continued in 2019 in California, Colorado, West Virginia and now the Carolinas, with new strikes and protests set in New York City, Chicago and Detroit.

The fight against austerity and social inequality is international. Earlier this month, 300,000 Polish teachers conducted a 17-day national strike. Over the last 14 months, educators launched strikes in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Mexico, Argentina, France, the Netherlands and many other countries.

One year ago, 20,000 teachers and their supporters marched in Raleigh. The meager funding increases approved by Democratic Governor Roy Cooper and the Republican-controlled legislature still leave pay well below the national average, and the state remains 39th in the nation in per-pupil spending.

Every public opinion poll shows enormous popular support for the teacher strikes and for substantial improvements in pay and school funding throughout the country. But the Democrats and Republicans have ignored public sentiment. In at least 12 states, including North Carolina, state governments are spending less on K-12 schools today than they did before the Great Recession. In 42 states, teachers are paid less than they were in 2009–10.

Over the last two decades, the two corporate-backed parties have diverted virtually all of society's resources into the bank accounts of the super-rich. Whether it was Bush or Obama or Trump in the White House, both parties found trillions to bail out the financial criminals on Wall Street, fund tax cuts for Amazon and other corporations, subsidize the charter school industry and wage criminal wars to grab oil and other resources.

In the face of this bipartisan war against public education, the unions have told teachers that the Democrats will listen to their demands. "We wanted to make sure they knew that we wanted public education policy makers standing up for us, and they failed to do so last year," North Carolina Association of Educators president Mark Jewell said, adding, "So, we went to the ballot box on Nov. 6, and changed the policy makers. So now it's time to change the policy."

But the fact is that all the "policy makers," Democratic and Republican, are beholden to the giant corporations. They will not carry out any policy that impinges on the entrenched wealth and power of the capitalists.

A serious struggle is required. Not only must teachers be paid a high wage, but hundreds of billions must be spent to improve schools, finance the most advanced technologies, and make sure that all children—regardless of family income—have access to the highest-quality education.

The biggest obstacles to unifying educators across the country are the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state and local affiliates. Allied with the Democrats and led by union executives like AFT President Randi Weingarten (salary $514,000) and NEA President Lily Eskelsen García (salary $414,824), whose incomes put

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them in the top 5 percent of income earners, the unions are hostile to any challenge to the concentration of wealth.

Teachers must draw the lessons of the last year of struggle. The teacher rebellion was largely initiated from below by teachers on social media and in defiance of the NEA and AFT. Unable to stop the strikes, the NEA and AFT did everything to isolate each struggle, wear down teachers and then sign sellout deals that included minimal pay raises largely funded by regressive taxes or cuts to other vital programs. In every case, the union officials proclaimed, “Remember in November” and peddled the lie that the Democrats were the friends of teachers.

Teachers require new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by rank-and-file educators themselves, to fight for what teachers, support staff and their children need, not what the big business politicians claim is affordable. These rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees should reach out and 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.

Tens of millions the world over are coming to understand that meeting society’s needs is incompatible with the capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of life to the ever-greater enrichment of the corporate and financial elite.

A fundamental change in society’s priorities will not be accomplished by appealing to the powers-that-be and their representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties to increase their taxes and create a more humane capitalism.

The working class must build a powerful political movement against both corporate-controlled parties to fight for a workers’ government and the socialist reorganization of economic and political life. This will include the expropriation of the ill-gotten fortunes of the rich, a vast redistribution of the wealth, and an infusion of resources to raise the material and cultural level of the entire population.

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