“I am ready to stay out and not going back in until we get everything we need”

More than 20,000 participate in Oregon walkouts for public education

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More than 20,000 teachers participated in statewide one-day walkouts across Oregon on Wednesday to express their support for public education. They were joined by thousands of other students, school workers and families.

Twenty-five districts were forced to close due to a lack of adequate staff and substitute teachers to operate, while in other districts, teachers left class early. Major rallies and protests took place in Portland, Salem, Eugene and Bend.

Educators, like their counterparts across the United States and internationally, feel compelled to fight against the poor school conditions produced by nearly four decades of budget cuts and austerity. Overcrowded classrooms, high caseloads for nurses and school psychologists, and poorly funded Special Education and Arts programs have become the norm for public schools.

Representatives of the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* distributed leaflets to attendees at the rally in downtown Portland, speaking with educators and supporters about the need to build rank-and-file committees to unite the working class in a common fight to defend public education, in opposition to the Democrats, Republicans and the trade unions. Over the past year, the unions have worked mightily to isolate the emerging struggles of teachers and to shut down any strike as rapidly as possible.

In keeping with the pattern set by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) throughout the teachers’ strike wave over the past year, the Oregon Education Association (OEA) and its affiliated local unions called the demonstration in an attempt to diffuse the mounting anger of educators. At the same time, they sought to use the one-day action to bolster the Democratic Party, which has been directly responsible for the defunding of the Oregon education system as the dominant state party since 1988.

Framing the rally as a means to appeal to the state legislature to “finally invest in public education,” the OEA unions have heavily promoted the Democrats’ Student Success Act, which proposes a .57 percent business tax to allocate $1 billion annually to K–12 schools by 2020. Though this amount is less than the bare minimum $2.5 billion recommended by the Quality Education Commission and will do nothing to resolve the crisis of public education, OEA President John Larson declared that the proposal would provide “game-changing investments in all students.”

The cuts to public education, which in Oregon have been carried out by the Democrats, have been drastic. Dithya, a ninth-grade student at Sunset High School, spoke with reporters at the Portland rally about the fate of education if nothing changes. “Class sizes are going to grow larger. Electives will get cut, since they aren’t necessary to graduation.” Her friend Isabella added, “At my sister’s school, they proposed cutting the whole Spanish program.”

She continued, “Right now, teachers aren’t able to provide the best education, since they can’t pay attention to us like they’d like to. They can’t help each individual student, or take all our questions.”

“Kids are the future. Without education, we are

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screwed." Though she expressed doubts and questions about socialism, Dithya said, "I do believe in equal opportunity. And I believe that every human has basic rights to food, shelter, and education."

Many of the protesting teachers recognize that this supposedly "historic" funding bill will not resolve the fundamental crisis that they have watched unfold in their classrooms over decades. "Two billion is small change," a high school teacher told WSWS reporters at a demonstration of thousands in downtown Portland. "We have so many problems to address. Seven billion could do something. So I am mad, and it's hard for me to be here [at the rally]. This is all to diffuse a larger strike, which [the OEA unions] don't want. The Portland Association of Teachers say they're ready to fight, but I don't know."

Bryan, an eighth-grade English teacher at Harriet Tubman Middle School, expressed additional criticisms of the efforts by the unions and Democratic Party to diffuse a broader struggle. "In Oakland, the teachers led wildcats. This [rally] here today is a field trip. The unions are telling us this is a historic thing, where we can organize and really show them [the state government]. But I am ready to stay out and not going back in until we get everything we need. This kind of low-impact action takes away anything that makes a mass movement powerful."

He asked, "How is this gathering of educators connected to all the other movements, like West Virginia? How are the OEA and NEA connecting us here to those movements all over?" Lynn, a teacher at Beverly Cleary K–8 School and friend of Bryan, answered, "It's all divide and conquer. ... The corporations run the show."

Bryan rejected the idea that the problems of public education could be resolved through identity politics, stating that the underfunded school districts had not been helped by the hiring of Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero, who had been touted as a means to strengthen "diversity" and benefit "black and brown" students. "Politicians are great at shapeshifting," he declared, of dressing things up as if they were progressive when they aren't. "It's like Obama. Do I need a killer to look like me? No."

To carry their struggle forward, educators must form new organizations of struggle completely independent of the unions, to fight for what schools and students need, rejecting what big-business politicians claim is affordable. These organizations need to be based on an understanding that the attacks on public education are not local issues, but are a national and international phenomenon driven by the global crisis of capitalism, in opposition to the unions' insistent efforts to isolate strikes and focus on local school boards and budgets.

The task facing teachers everywhere is to build a broad movement of the working class, uniting teachers with other sections of workers, to carry out mass demonstrations and to prepare for a general strike.

Oregon educators can help build the independent political movement necessary to wage a real fight for fully-funded education that meets all social needs. We urge all teachers, school workers, students and families to sign up for notifications and share your contributions with the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* .

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