

Little Rock, Arkansas teachers stage one-day strike

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With overwhelming community support, Little Rock, Arkansas, teachers on Thursday walked out in their first strike in 32 years. Teachers, parents, and students picketed 41 campuses and rallied at the State Capitol. Hundreds marched in front of Central High School, the site of the 1957 desegregation struggle by the “Little Rock Nine,” a critical event in the fight for equality and public education for all.

“I’m here because I’m indignant,” Jennifer Lusk, a German teacher at Central, told the media. “I’m indignant about what they’re doing to public education in this city, and I’m not going down without a fight.”

Amber Allison, a second-grade teacher, said she was striking because things have gone downhill since the state takeover in 2015. “They have made our jobs harder with less support,” she said.

“My mom is a teacher, so I have seen first hand how hard it can be for teachers that can’t teach the way they want,” said Emily Jefferson, a student at Central High School, speaking to the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*. “As students, we are the ones who are being affected. We are the future teachers and leaders. We had to be out here.”

Over the past few weeks, mass community meetings, rallies and a vigil of 2,000 residents have backed the teachers. Thousands of the city’s high school students held a “sickout” October 29–30 to show their support.

It had been widely expected that the 1,800-member Little Rock Education Association (LREA) would strike after the October 31 contract expiration, particularly following the state’s provocative suspension of their bargaining rights. However, the union delayed and last week called a “work-to-rule” and walk-in. Finally, it opted to call a strike, limited to a one-day protest walkout. LREA President Teresa Knapp Gordon has since held open the possibility that

the action could continue if the school board fails to return the district to full local control.

The LREA timed the walkout for the monthly meeting of the Arkansas Board of Education, which is scheduled to vote on local control. Last month the board approved a plan that would split the school district, largely along racial lines, permitting local control only to a more well-to-do section. It has since backed off partially, but has yet to release a memorandum of understanding regarding continued state control.

In 2013, Arkansas officials deemed six of Little Rock’s 48 schools as “failing.” After then placing the LRSD under state control, the administration dramatically increased the number of charter schools. The aim of the current plan, transparent to educators and parents, is to push for further privatization in the 23,000-student district.

In this effort, Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson has been working in tandem with his political benefactor, the Walton Family Foundation, which has spent hundreds of millions of dollars nationally to privatize education. The Waltons’ \$300 billion Walmart business is based in Bentonville, Arkansas. The Walton family has played an outsized role in overseeing the evisceration of public education in the state.

On Thursday, the state Department of Education secretary, Johnny Key, kept schools open, having hired scabs in advance. But according to district reports at least 130 support staff respected picket lines. Hundreds of families boycotted school in solidarity with the teachers. Key issued a statement that “public employees do not have the right to strike against the government” and boasted that newer teachers would receive a pay increase to the miserly sum of \$36,000 per year in the contract offered by the state government.

Joining state government officials in denouncing the teachers was the Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA), a professional association. It issued a statement saying that it “cannot support actions such as strikes and work stoppages.” It called the strike “illegal,” citing state Supreme Court statements, although there is no statute that prohibits teacher strikes. It also called the walkout “unethical” and a “disproportionate” attack on “vulnerable families.”

For their part, 61 teachers from Central High School issued a public letter warning of the issues at stake and expressing their determination to fight. “Our students—and we as educators—are pawns in a high-stakes game of government-led systematic oppression and profit-making by large corporations,” they wrote. “These entities seek to dismantle public education in Little Rock. These individuals and groups view education as a profit-making endeavor which serves to bolster their portfolios—it has nothing to do with educating and serving children...

“Our district has been targeted by the deep pockets of billionaires and political cronyism. We can no longer stand by idly... We will never allow our city to once again be torn apart by the segregationist policies of those who hold political power.

“As faculty at Little Rock Central, we have the privilege to teach in the hallowed hallways of this historic building. It once served as a beacon of optimism for nine courageous young women and men.”

The letter concludes: “We will resist the destruction of our school and district at any cost.”

Collectively, the 61 educators have more than 1,000 years of experience, 14 National Board Certifications and more than 30 local/state and national awards.

The struggle in Little Rock takes place as anger grows among Chicago teachers, who are voting on a sellout contract. New struggles continue to brew, including a walkout by teachers in Sonoma County, California.

Teachers have rallied and struck from coast to coast over the systematic starving of schools under both the Democrats and Republicans. But the policy of the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is to portray the defunding and privatization of public schools as “local” issues and prevent teachers from linking up their struggles.

The unions, preoccupied with maintaining their dues flow and “seat at the table,” have not united the working class, but insisted instead that teachers subordinate themselves to what the politicians say is “affordable.” In every struggle they have sought to channel the teachers’ fight behind the Democratic Party and its election campaigns.

As they did in Chicago, Democratic presidential hopefuls Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have tweeted their “support” to the Little Rock strikers. In fact, Sanders and Warren are providing their full support not to the teachers but to the union apparatus, which is seeking to demobilize workers and keep them isolated.

Little Rock teachers should note that Sanders specifically allied himself with the betrayal of the Chicago teachers, endorsing a contract sellout that meets none of the demands of educators.

Whether fighting the cuts being imposed by Democratic administrations, such as Mayor Lori Lightfoot in Chicago, or against the Republican privatization drive in Arkansas, teachers are locked in the same life-and-death struggle against capitalism and its two political parties.

Workers and young people should study the teachers’ strike in Chicago and establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, the Democrats and the Republicans, to fight for the defense and expansion of public education. This will require a frontal assault on the billions hoarded by the Waltons and on the capitalist system as a whole.

The resources squandered on the financial oligarchs must be put under the control of the working class and used to meet social needs. The survival of public education requires the fight for socialism.



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