“How can dissent be illegal when that is how the country was started?”

Oklahoma teachers oppose Trump and his Tulsa rally

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US President Donald Trump’s decision to hold a campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma today, as the state’s COVID-19 infections and deaths hit a record high, has been widely denounced in the media and has provoked opposition from Oklahoma workers. Over 9,300 people have tested positive for coronavirus in Oklahoma and at least 366 people have died, including nearly 2,000 infections and 65 deaths in Tulsa.

The rally, planned for this evening at the BOK Center, is expected to fill the 19,000-seat indoor arena to capacity, creating an immense vector for the disease that will vastly accelerate its spread across the region. All attendees are required to sign liability waivers absolving the Trump campaign of any responsibility should they fall ill after attending the event.

The rally takes place amid the nationwide wave of protests against racism and police brutality that have erupted following the May 25 police murder of George Floyd. Provocatively, Trump initially planned to hold the rally on June 19, the holiday known as Juneteenth which commemorates the emancipation of the slaves.

Tulsa’s Greenwood District was the site of the worst pogrom against African Americans in US history, from May 31 to June 1, 1921, when up to 300 people were killed, hundreds more were injured, and up to 10,000 African Americans were left homeless. This historic event undoubtedly motivated Trump’s selection of Tulsa as the site of his rally.

On Friday, Trump tweeted a fascistic rant aimed at those protesting the rally: “Any protesters, anarchists, agitators, looters or lowlifes who are going to Oklahoma please understand, you will not be treated like you have been in New York, Seattle, or Minneapolis. It will be a much different scene!”

World Socialist Web Site recently spoke with two Oklahoma teachers about Trump’s rally in Tulsa, as well as conditions facing educators and students in the state amid the pandemic.

In April 2018, tens of thousands of Oklahoma educators waged a powerful 10-day statewide walkout to demand improvements in teacher pay and school funding. However, the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and the Oklahoma City-American Federation of Teachers (AFT) shut the struggle down and cut a deal with the state’s Republican governor and state legislature, leaving teacher pay and per-pupil funding levels near the bottom of all US states.

Both teachers were eager to discuss the mass demonstrations against police violence, Trump’s visit to Tulsa, and the issues they face as educators amid the pandemic.

Jane, a high school history and math teacher in a rural school district, told the WSWS, “I know Trump is saying the protests are insurrectionary in order to use the Patriot Act to turn the guns towards US citizens. He is saying that dissent and protest is domestic terrorism, and therefore illegal. Dissent was illegal in the United Kingdom under King George III, and we wrote the Declaration of Independence to say that we were not illegal.”

Jane observed that the Declaration states that governments derive their power “from the consent of the governed,” noting, “What is happening today doesn’t look like ‘consent of the governed’ to me. How can dissent be illegal when that is how the country was started? It’s an oxymoron in the US to have ‘illegal dissent.’”

Alex, a high school teacher in a different rural county, stated, “Trump’s visit blows me away. I think it is

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horrible. People come here and visit Tulsa because it is very artsy and cosmopolitan. They do show out there for Juneteenth. It is an event there every year by people who are forward-thinking. Trump is coming mockingly, and he knows this. So do we. We are so opposed to him coming because of the way he tries to repaint history."

As Jane expressed her anger over the murder of George Floyd, she pointed out that police target the most oppressed sections of society, regardless of race. She said, "Of course, there is a connection between social inequality and police killings. In Oklahoma there are not many African Americans, but there are many Native Americans. A Native American was recently shot in the back of the head. Two months later, one of my student's fathers was hit in the back of the head and the police claimed it was self-defense. Both people were sitting in their cars when they were shot."

She added, "Poor white people are also being hit. Every person that I have ever talked to and I ask, 'Does your heart drop if the police are behind you?,' says, 'Yes!' They know it could go south easily."

Commenting on the pandemic and its impact on Oklahoma, Jane said, "They are trying to cloak the numbers. The doctors say there is a 25 percent increase in hospitalizations, but the official numbers say there are not many COVID-19 cases. The response of the state press secretary is to move us to Phase 3 and open more businesses, even though we haven't had a decrease."

Alex stressed the need for educators to begin organizing against the unsafe reopening of schools, stating: "If we just think it is the auto workers in Mexico that are being forced back to work at gunpoint, we'd better think again. And don't think that this president won't try to pull a PATCO and fire us all if we all stay home. When it comes time, we need to get ready with an understanding and brace for what's coming. It's coming. They are intent on reopening schools."

Last month, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt—the former CEO of Gateway Mortgage Group—signed the 2021 state budget, which is the second lowest this century when adjusted for inflation and population growth, according to the Oklahoma Policy Institute. Although both parties have long showered the oil industry with huge tax abatements, Oklahoma's budget is heavily dependent on the industry, which is reeling from a steep decline in oil prices. Predictably, the budget includes no new taxes on wealthy oil producers.

Commenting on the looming austerity facing Oklahoma educators, Jane said, "Stitt allotted more for charter and private schools than public schools in the current budget. We were already told there was no money even before COVID, so they will definitely say there is no money after this pandemic." She also noted that Stitt sought to increase the Oklahoma Equal Opportunity Education Scholarship Tax Credit, a voucher program supported by Trump, from $25 million to $30 million.

Both teachers have watched the decline of social conditions for their students, and the working conditions they face, since the ending of the strike in 2018. They also addressed the betrayal of the unions, and the bipartisan nature of the attacks on public education.

Jane said, "The union didn't start the strike, but the union ended it. I know why we need unions, we have to be organized, but they have been infiltrated."

"During our strike they tried to make it illegal for teachers to congregate. I thought it was cute when they told us we couldn't congregate. The First Amendment guarantees 'the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.'"

Alex explained that the worst attacks on education he has seen in his 21 years of teaching came under the Democratic Obama administration, stating, "Obama gave away more wealth to corporations than any other president. Those that suffered the most under Obama were African Americans, so what would he do to the rest of us? He was awful for the whole working class."

Alex stated, "I would like people to know it's a class question. Everyone take one step back. Who has the keys to our education? It certainly is not teachers and parents. Privatizers are slithering around and taking money for themselves, while we are trying to protect it for the students. Educators have to get involved, otherwise we are sitting back and taking it. Like it or dislike it we will not recognize the country in ten years if they abolish public education. There is a lot of money there and the corporations want it."

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