

Central Indiana teachers conduct sickout for higher pay, lower insurance premiums

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Central Indiana teachers in the Anderson School District, located near Indianapolis, conducted a sickout last week to demand higher pay and lower insurance premiums. At least 100 teachers, or 25 percent of the teachers, called in sick for half a week, forcing the district to switch to remote learning.

The sickout ended Thursday with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) intervening to prevent a wider revolt. A mediation session between the AFT and the district began last Thursday and is expected to continue through Monday. Many Anderson teachers are also expected to rally Monday outside school buildings to garner support for their fight.

The sickout by Anderson teachers is one of many such revolts by workers over the last several weeks in opposition to unsafe workplaces and poverty pay. Last week, over 800 Scranton, Pennsylvania teachers walked out after four years without a contract to oppose low pay, unsafe workplace conditions during the pandemic and cuts to public education imposed by the political establishment with the help of the teachers unions. More than 10,000 John Deere workers are also on strike, having voted against two concessionary agreements brought by the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the company.

Parents who found out about the Anderson teachers sickout that began on Friday, October 29 learned that the district had to scramble to find caretakers for the students. What they found were “glorified babysitters,” according to a parent who spoke to WTHR. By Wednesday last week, the district had to shut down completely.

Despite the difficulty confronting parents, many voiced their support for the teachers on strike. One parent told WTHR, “I am backing them 100 percent. They deserve what they need to be paid for, and if

they’re not going to get it from here, guess what? They’re going to move to a different district. I don’t want that to happen, I don’t.”

The school district attempted to save face by offering \$2000 more in pay and \$10,000 in stipends over the next few years. With widespread stagnant pay for Indiana teachers for more than two decades, this insulting offer was rejected by both teachers and parents.

“It should be more. It really should be more, like at least 8 to 10 percent more,” a parent told WTHR.

Teachers in Indiana have some of the lowest salaries in the country. Adjusted for inflation, teachers in Indiana have seen a decline of more than 16 percent in pay since 2000, according to statistics compiled by the NEA, the largest decline in any state. Schools have also been chronically underfunded for at least two decades under multiple Republican governors as well as with the support of Democratic politicians.

In 2019, more than a thousand teachers rallied at the Indianapolis state capitol building. However, the teachers unions, including the Indiana State Teachers Association (ISTA), which is affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA), declared that strikes were off the table. Instead, they worked with both Republicans in the state government and Democrats to maintain low pay and horrendous working conditions.

Like other states, Indiana has made teachers strikes illegal, which the teachers unions have frequently used to justify clamping down on rank-and-file teachers rebellions. But this did not stop the mass strikes by tens of thousands of teachers across the United States in 2018 and 2019 that erupted first in West Virginia.

Indiana AFT president Randy Harrison admitted that teachers salaries have stagnated for more than a decade,

which both the NEA and the AFT have done nothing to stop, either across the US or in Indiana. Harrison told the *Herald Bulletin*, “A lot of our teachers have been locked on a salary scale for about five years. 2015 was the last time a teacher could go up in an increment, and it was the last time they could get their master’s degree to be placed in a master’s column, according to state law changes.”

Teachers in Indiana were reaching the boiling point even before the pandemic. Many have had to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, including gig work as food delivery drivers. “I cannot make ends meet on my pay despite 15 years experience and a master’s,” one teacher told *Chalkbeat*. “I am tired of watching the schools in the poorest communities having their funding cut yearly. I am tired of the insane school grade system and the endless testing.”

Throughout the pandemic, the teachers unions have facilitated the reopening of schools across the country, allowing the virus to spread across student bodies and into the surrounding communities and take more lives. AFT President Randi Weingarten (who makes more than half a million in salary a year) has been the chief spokesperson for school reopenings, working with President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party to ensure that schools remain open in order to send parents back to work so that corporate profits and Wall Street can be protected.

In September, Weingarten held a town hall with far-right proponents for school reopenings, Open Schools USA. She gave a platform for proponents of the deadly pseudo-scientific program of “herd immunity,” including those who oppose even limited mitigation measures such as vaccination and mask mandates. In Indiana, new state guidance allows children who test positive but are asymptomatic to remain in school, where they will inevitably infect classmates and teachers.

The result is that over 16,898 people have died so far in Indiana of COVID-19, according to the official count, and more than 1 million have been infected. Right-wing forces have been emboldened by the policies of both parties and the unions to promote anti-mask and vaccine protests at various Indiana school board meetings.

A recent report found that nearly 19 percent of Indiana students were chronically absent during the

pandemic, in large part due to concerns by parents and students about infection. The school district of Muncie, northeast of the Anderson school district, had absenteeism of nearly 44 percent last year.

Anderson teachers fighting for better pay and benefits should put no trust in the AFT, which has strangled teachers strikes over the past two years and promoted the unsafe and deadly school reopenings.

Anderson teachers should also broaden their struggles to other teachers in Indiana, including other sections of workers, such as nearby Fort Wayne Dana auto parts workers and striking John Deere workers.

Like their counterparts across the country, they should begin to form their own organizations, rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and both capitalist parties, to fight for higher pay, fully-paid health care benefits and high-quality remote education that is safe for students and teachers until the pandemic is contained. These committees are being built all over the world as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), an international network to unite workers in a common struggle against poverty and unsafe workplaces and schools.

Contact the IWA-RFC to form an educators and parents rank-and-file committee at your school district in Anderson or across Indiana.



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