

The struggle against the cuts at West Virginia University and the role of the AFT

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13 September 2023

On Friday, the Board of Governors of West Virginia University (WVU) is set to vote on sweeping cuts that will eliminate hundreds of jobs and disrupt the educational goals of countless students. The entire World Languages Department and several majors in arts and culture, as well as the PhD program in mathematics, the only one in the state of West Virginia, are set to be destroyed. The pretext for the cuts is a budget deficit of \$45 million. But while these programs are under attack, the state government is investing the exact same amount—\$45 million—in a new cybersecurity center at Marshall University.

Indeed, it was during the same session of lawmakers that rejected funding for WVU to stop the cuts that the same amount of money was granted to fund the cybersecurity project just 20 miles away. That project directly enhances the ability of the US to effectively wage war.

These decisions are more than symbolic. They indicate that the ruling class has a strategy to divert all funding towards wars that are intended to further enrich itself, at the expense of the democratic and social rights of the working class to education and culture.

Coming after decades of austerity, the cuts at WVU, unless opposed by the working class and students, will set a new benchmark for the assault on culture and public education across the country and internationally.

There is a profound sense among workers and students that their most basic cultural, social and democratic rights are at stake. Speaking to the WWSW, WVU senior Tim called the cuts “a blatant bourgeois attack on the working class.” He went on to explain that “they do not care about the people of West Virginia, they want to make it so that the people of West Virginia stop thinking and keep working.”

When asked about the broader picture, he said, “The consulting company they used to decide on what they were going to cut is RPK group ... it’s [involved in working out cuts at] schools around the country. I know they are working on setting up some cuts at a school in Taiwan even. So it’s going to be a bigger problem than just a West Virginia University problem.”

Significantly, many students in the course of their protests have recalled the historic struggles of the working class in West Virginia. But the lessons of this history must be learned.

The historic class battle of the West Virginia coal miners at Blair Mountain in 1921 underscores the tremendous courage and militancy of the working class but also the ruthlessness and brutality of the ruling class. Above all, this history shows that militancy alone is not enough. In order to confront the ruling class and the entire capitalist system, workers and youth need a political program, perspective and strategy.

This is what, so far, is sorely lacking in the protests.

West Virginia University students have organized themselves in the West Virginia University Student Union (WVUSU), while many faculty are members of the West Virginia Campus Workers (WVCW). The campus workers union is open to anyone who receives a paycheck from a West Virginia college or university, including student workers, undergraduate workers, graduate workers, part-time workers, hourly

workers, tenured and untenured workers, staff and faculty. Both the student union and the workers union were recently affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Since the announcement of the program cuts and layoffs, the AFT academics’ website has become more active, publishing several articles, including a letter by AFT President Randi Weingarten addressed to the WVU Board of Governors. Weingarten’s letter calls for the Board of Governors and the university administration to “advocate for increased state support to make up for the shortfall in the short term and to adequately fund the university going forward.”

The entire perspective advocated by the AFT amounts to directing appeals to the Democrats and Republicans and the university administration. This is a strategy for defeat.

The sharpest warning must be issued to the students and workers who want to fight against the cuts. The role of the AFT bureaucracy is treacherous. It has become involved in the West Virginia University protests, not because it seeks to organize opposition but because it seeks to isolate and sabotage it.

Claims to the effect that the student protests are “not political” must be rejected. The first task of students and faculty who seek to oppose these cuts is to gain a clear political understanding of what lies behind them, who their class enemies are and who their class allies are. This means they must draw the lessons of the role of the AFT in the sellout of the 2018 West Virginia teachers strikes as well as its support for the imperialist war in Ukraine.

The AFT has 1.7 million members, the majority of whom are pre-K through 12th grade teachers. Like other unions, it is controlled by a well paid bureaucratic apparatus whose class interests are in opposition to those of its rank-and-file members and completely hostile to the independent mobilization of the working class. Randi Weingarten, the president of the AFT, is a millionaire, who, as of 2020, receives an annual salary of well over half a million dollars.

It is the social interests of this highly paid bureaucracy, not those of the rank and file, that have determined the AFT’s policies for many years. For decades, the AFT bureaucracy has been instrumental in the assault of the ruling class on public education. In every major battle by educators, the AFT has channeled working class militancy into support for Democratic Party politicians and rammed through contracts that further eroded the living standards of the rank and file.

Workers in West Virginia have made especially bitter experiences with the AFT. In 2018, 33,000 West Virginia teachers waged a courageous nine-day battle, initiating a nationwide wave of struggles by educators against attacks on public education.

The strike did not begin at the initiative of the leadership of the AFT or the National Education Association (NEA) and their West Virginia affiliates. Rather, it was launched at the initiative of rank-and-file members who met in classrooms and coordinated on social media. The AFT and NEA bureaucrats called for strike action only when it became

impossible to contain the teachers' anger. Having been forced to call a strike, they sought to limit it first to two days and then added a two-day extension.

But teachers all over the state refused to return to work and defied the back-to-work mandates of the union officials and Governor Jim Justice. They maintained their picket lines.

A teacher from the impoverished mining region of Boone County told the WSWS:

The union leaders thought they put a lid on this strike. Last night, the union leaders were talking to us like fifth grade kids. They said we were dividing people by not listening to them and ending the strike. We said, "No, the people are united down here. It's you, up on the stage, that we are divided with."

The response of the NEA and AFT locals was to push through a contract that was a repackaged version of an offer the teachers had previously rejected, with no time for the teachers to examine it or hold a vote on a return to work.

The trade union bureaucracies and the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), as well as the DSA's unofficial publication *Jacobin* magazine, wasted no time declaring the new contract a "victory" for the teachers. But the reality was very different.

The contract included an insulting one-time 5 percent raise and did not address the main concern of the teachers, the skyrocketing cost of their healthcare through the Public Employee Insurance Agency. What the teachers gained in wages was extracted by the state government from the community as a whole. Funding for healthcare clinics was cut, public employee jobs were eliminated and a free college tuition program was canceled.

At the conclusion of the strike, the WSWS published a statement titled *Lessons of the West Virginia Teachers Strike*, which drew from the experience of the teachers' struggle the central dynamic of the new upsurge of working class struggle—that it would take the form of a rebellion of rank-and-file workers against the pro-corporate trade union bureaucracies.

Since then, the AFT has been centrally responsible for sabotaging educators' struggles against the unsafe reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and has sold out several other strikes by educators and academic workers, including, most recently, the graduate student strike at the University of Michigan.

The attacks on public education and the living standards of the working class cannot be separated from the wars pursued by imperialism abroad. The Biden administration has requested a \$1 trillion military budget for fiscal year 2024, a budget designed to prepare for a world war. Moreover, it has sent tens of billions of dollars in weapons and military supplies to Ukraine in order to extend and escalate the war against Russia, after the US and NATO deliberately provoked the invasion of Ukraine by the oligarchic Putin regime. It did so by exploiting the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 to extend NATO eastward to Russia's borders and then organizing the 2014 overthrow of an elected pro-Russian government in Ukraine by far-right forces, installing a virulently anti-Russian government in Kiev.

Imperialist war abroad always means class war at home. As trillions of dollars are funneled into the military, the living standards of workers are decimated, along with their social and democratic rights. At the same time, the pursuit of war makes it imperative for the ruling class to suppress the growing resistance of the working class. The AFT bureaucracy plays a central role in propping up both aspects of this imperialist policy, which is spearheaded by the Democratic Party.

On June 23, the AFT officially announced its endorsement of Joe Biden for reelection. President Randi Weingarten posted a video of support on twitter, stating:

President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris really care about people. They get the importance of workers having a voice and students having real opportunity. They are unabashedly pro-labor and pro-education.

Joe Biden is "pro-union" only in the sense that he is determined to bolster the position of the union bureaucracies as an apparatus to suppress the growing rebellion of the rank and file. His administration has pursued a deliberate policy of corporatism, seeking to integrate the union leaderships evermore closely into the capitalist state machine.

Randi Weingarten personifies the complete integration of the union leadership with the state. Last year, Weingarten personally flew to Ukraine for a pro-war tour. Covering up the sinister history of Ukrainian fascism, she shook hands and took pictures with contemporary followers of the World War II-era Ukrainian Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, who bears political responsibility for the murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews and tens of thousands of Poles.

Weingarten is an outspoken promoter of the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the historical lies used to justify the war by academics such as Timothy Snyder. Earlier, she supported the US-backed 2014 far-right coup in Kiev. Last summer, the AFT passed a resolution aimed at covering up the integration of far-right and openly fascist forces into the Ukrainian state and military.

Her support for the wars of US imperialism abroad and Washington's fascist allies must serve as the starkest warning for workers and youth in West Virginia: The AFT bureaucracy is a central part of the machinery of the ruling class for suppressing the class struggle and enforcing its strategy of war abroad and class war at home.

It is therefore no coincidence that in her letter to the Board of Governors, in which she suggested pressuring Jim Justice to allocate money from the state of West Virginia to cover the \$45 million deficit at WVU, Weingarten failed to mention the recent funding of a new cybersecurity department at nearby Marshall University for the same amount, \$45 million. The role of the AFT bureaucracy in this struggle is not only to demobilize and disperse opposition to the cuts but also to hide from students and faculty what really stands behind the cuts at West Virginia University.

In order to fight against the cuts at West Virginia University, workers and youth need a clear political understanding of what they are confronting: Behind the cuts are not simply the personal decisions by the administrators of West Virginia University or President E. Gordon Gee but a bipartisan strategy of the American ruling class to destroy all remaining social and cultural rights of the working class so as to pay for war. In this struggle, the AFT bureaucracy stands on the side of the ruling class, not the workers and students. It seeks to promote illusions that Democratic and Republican lawmakers can be pressured into making concessions as a means of demobilizing the immense opposition to the cuts. But the ruling class is not going to make concessions.

In order to fight against the cuts, workers and youth must counterpose their own strategy of class struggle to the strategy of war of the ruling class. This requires, above all, a break from the trade union bureaucracies and the Democratic Party.

Instead, faculty and students who are determined to fight for their cultural and social rights must turn to the working class. At 11:59 p.m. this Thursday, September 14, the contracts for 150,000 autoworkers in the US will expire, with those for 18,000 Canadian autoworkers expiring on

September 18. The conditions are ripe for an international struggle by educators alongside autoworkers and other sections of the working class.

The way to link up the fight at West Virginia University with the struggle of broader sections of the working class in the US and internationally is to establish an independent rank-and-file committee that will raise demands and develop the struggle based on what students and workers need, not what the university administration or the union bureaucracy says is possible.

Many such committees already exist in several countries and industries, organized as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). By joining this movement, students and faculty can connect with the mass struggles in other parts of the world and break free of the straitjacket of the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party.

We urge all students, faculty and residents of West Virginia who wish to discuss this program and perspective to reach out today to the WSWs and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)