

West Virginia teachers authorize statewide strike

By Nancy Hanover
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A statewide meeting of the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) and the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) in Flatwoods on Sunday announced that county-by-county balloting showed overwhelming support throughout the state for a teachers' strike.

West Virginia teachers, now paid 48th lowest out of 50 states in the United States, are demanding an increase in salary and oppose plans by the bipartisan Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA) to increase out-of-pocket health care expenses. Last week, the state senate approved an insulting 1 percent annual raise.

WVEA President Dale Lee quickly followed up by assuring the state legislature and big business interests that the strike vote “doesn't mean we're calling something on Monday. The legislative process is still early. It's time to look at the legislation that's moving and...work the process for the best possible deal.”

The union executives are clearly concerned that they may not be able to hold back statewide action by 20,000 educators. Christine Campbell, AFT-WV president, remarked that there were demands for strike action even in the remote rural counties. “It's coming from everywhere,” she said. For his part, Lee emphasized he was ruling out any “immediate action” while the “legislative process” continued.

Rank-and-file teachers, however, are determined to fight. Rallies were held in Preston, Kanawha, Fayette, Braxton, Marion, Berkeley and Jackson counties. At a rally in Wheeling, an Ohio County teacher told the press that her family's monthly premium would double under the proposed PEIA plan, from about \$300 to over \$600 a month.

“This whole movement has been from the bottom up and I'm going to do my best to make sure that we demand actions that will benefit all West Virginia public employees and West Virginia's children,” Nicole McCormick, a Mercer County teacher, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

McCormick, who emphasized that all public employees need a substantial pay raise, continued, “I feel, and many

others as well, that now is the time to harness this historic opportunity to demand what will progress and redefine West Virginia.”

Around the state there were reports that teachers were threatening to leave the unions if they failed to call a strike, while others called for broader strike action by public-sector workers who are all affected by the state's move to increase health expenses.

In 1990, 22,000 teachers defied Democratic Governor Gaston Caperton and the state's ban on teacher walkouts, striking for 11 days in the state's only official teachers' strike. Conditions for educators today are the same, or worse, than they were three decades ago when their pay was 49th in the nation.

Expressing the militant mood, reading teacher Karen Stroup declared, “Without us, the state of West Virginia would shut down,” according to local media coverage of a rally in the eastern panhandle town of Charles Town last Friday. “We're not out here just for teachers,” Jamie Bowden, an English teacher, was quoted as saying in a report in the *Journal*. “We're here for all employees in West Virginia, because what's going on in the legislature affects all of us.”

Teachers and school workers in Cabell and Wayne Counties voted separately to call a one-day work stoppage February 16, the day before a mass statewide rally at the capitol in Charleston called by the unions.

Governor Jim Justice, a coal baron and the richest man in West Virginia, with a net worth of \$1.6 billion, has remained adamant that the state will give teachers no more than an annual 1 percent raise—a de facto pay cut after inflation—for the next five years. Justice began his career as a Republican, ran for governor and was elected as a Democrat in 2016 and then moved back into the Republican column, underscoring the unanimity of both big business parties against the working class.

Last week, the governor gave vent to the backwardness and class arrogance of the West Virginia elite, saying that there was “not a Chinaman's chance” that natural gas

severance taxes would be increased to fund education.

The state senate has approved Justice's 1 percent proposal, while state house representatives are calling for 2 percent the first year. Posturing as friends of the teachers, legislative Democrats are calling for a 3 percent increase, which is no less insulting for teachers who have not had a raise for a decade.

Far from speaking for the working class, the Democrats, who controlled the governor's mansion during most of the last 100 years, speak for the coal, gas and timber interests that run the state no less than the Republicans.

By design, the county-by-county votes merely "authorize" the unions to strike. From the outset, however, the NEA and AFT have intended to use the vote as leverage in their backroom maneuvers with the governor—which both unions backed in the 2016 election—and the legislators.

The national AFT and NEA, as well as their local affiliates, are opposed to any genuine mobilization of teachers, let alone all public-sector workers, because that would immediately turn into a political clash with both corporate-controlled parties and raise the issue of why public education is being starved of resources in the state and nationally.

Having already sustained significant political and financial losses due to the state's right-to-work law, the union bureaucracy is seeking to convince state officials that the unions are valuable to contain social opposition and help implement austerity if they are only allowed to retain their "seat at the table."

WVEA President Lee signaled the union's willingness to back a rotten deal in comments at a Princeton town hall meeting Saturday. "One percent is just the minimum, but when we get all these jobs coming and the revenue turns around and gets better, we are going to make that more," Lee said, according to the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*.

The WVEA president tried to dress up the legislators' phony search for a funding source as "progress," telling the crowd, Republican "House Speaker Tim Armistead wants a task force put together and wants us to have a seat at the table to come up with a solution to the problem." The union official concluded, "I am cautiously optimistic the House leadership is really trying to come up with a solution to the problems."

While the unions are preparing to call off the struggle, there is a growing sentiment among teachers for a broader battle which challenges the immense levels of inequality in the state. A teacher in the Princeton audience rebutted the claim that the state lacked "funding sources," saying, "They [the coal companies] bled us dry and took the money to other states," she said, adding that coal producing counties were left with no jobs, poverty and drugs.

Teachers also pointed out that the legislators were now looking to further impoverish the schools by eliminating the industrial property tax. The tax nets \$140 million a year statewide and in Mercer County, 72 percent of it goes to the school system, according to the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*.

Students also expressed their support. Trey Henry, a senior at Martinsburg High School, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that there were 200-300 people who came to support the teachers, including students from Martinsburg and teachers from around the county. "I think being a teacher is one of the most important jobs there is, if not the most important one. They set a foundation, they are life-changers. It is crazy that they are paid so little.

"Here in Martinsburg, the opioid crisis is terrible. I can't take my little brother to the park without finding a syringe. My dad overdosed on heroin. This has really impacted my life and it is my family and my teachers who were my foundation. Because of that, I plan to be a teacher and major in secondary education. Most students feel this way, even if they are not yet willing to stand up like I do."

The opposition of teachers in West Virginia is part of a broader movement of teachers, after more than a decade of attacks on them and the right to quality public education, spearheaded by the Obama administration and now being escalated by Trump's education secretary Betsy DeVos. Teachers in St. Paul, Minnesota face a strike deadline on Tuesday, while teachers in Pittsburgh, who have been working without a contract since June 2017, are currently taking a strike authorization vote.

West Virginia teachers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions by forming rank-and-file committees to reach out to parents, students, public employees, coal miners and every section of the working class for a common struggle to vastly improve public education and living standards. This must be bound up with the development of a powerful political movement of the working class, independent of and against the two big business parties, whose aim is a radical redistribution of wealth and the reorganization of economic life to meet social needs, not private profit.

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