

West Virginia strike continues as teachers reject unions' back-to-work order

By Joseph Kishore
1 March 2018

The statewide strike by more than 30,000 West Virginia teachers and school employees is continuing today, with workers rejecting an agreement announced Tuesday by the trade unions and the state's billionaire governor, Jim Justice.

Thousands of teachers descended on the state capitol Wednesday—a day designated by the unions as a “cooling off” period—chanting “We got sold out,” “It’s not over,” “Where’s the union?” and “We’re not leaving.” Signs carried by teachers included, “I just won a chicken on Let’s Make a Deal” and “Cool down day is heating us up.”

The continuation of the strike is a devastating repudiation of the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) and the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), which hailed the agreement with Justice as a major victory for teachers. The deal included a pledge for a five percent pay increase that might never be enacted and a token task force to investigate financing of the underfunded Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA), which manages health insurance covering teachers and state workers.

AFT-WV President Christine Campbell defended the sellout Tuesday, saying, “This has been a huge step in the right direction. We have a commitment.” The national president of the AFT, Randi Weingarten, whose annual salary is more than \$500,000, called the agreement “a starting point in terms of treating West Virginia’s teachers and school service personnel with the respect and dignity they deserve.”

On Wednesday morning, the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* issued a statement calling on teachers to reject the agreement, demand a statewide vote before any return to work, and form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to expand the

strike. It urged teachers to issue an appeal to workers throughout the country to mobilize in solidarity and carry out a unified struggle. The statement was read and shared widely by teachers throughout the day.

The decision to continue the strike was made by some teachers at impromptu meetings at the state Capitol on Wednesday. According to the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, workers from Boone County “had taken some sort of vote outside the nearby Culture Center to continue striking.” A local TV station reported that a teacher from the county said that educators were not “accepting” the proposal to end the strike.

Boone County is a mining area in the southern portion of the state. Teachers from southern counties were among those who launched countywide strikes that led up to a rally on February 17. It was at that rally that the unions, fearful that the situation could get out of control, announced a limited two-day strike for last Thursday and Friday. The two-day strike was extended to a third and fourth day on Monday and Tuesday, before the unions announced the agreement with Justice.

Facing an insurrection by teachers, the unions organized county-by-county votes on Wednesday afternoon and evening, hoping to cajole teachers to go back to work. Their efforts failed. Brandon Wolford, WVEA president in the southern coalfield county of Mingo, told the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, “I relayed the message to our superintendent that I have had very few, maybe two or three, who said they wanted to go back to work. The rest are absolutely in opposition, 100 percent.”

The *Gazette-Mail* commented that the strike would continue, “while state union leaders may no longer be fully supporting it.” At a 6:00 pm press conference Wednesday, Dale Lee, president of the WVEA,

reiterated, “We believe that the best course of action at this time is to return to work tomorrow,” but acknowledged that “not everyone will.”

Sources informed the WSWS that by 11:00 pm on Wednesday, every county in the state had announced the closure of the schools.

Throughout the process, the unions have sought to direct the anger of teachers behind fruitless appeals to Democratic and Republican politicians, all of whom are in the pockets of the coal, natural gas, petrochemical and pharmaceutical companies that dominate the state economy.

The continuation of the strike raises the prospect that the courts will issue injunctions and fines against teachers. The state, with the collaboration of the unions, will attempt to use such attacks or the threat of them as a means of intimidating workers and pressuring them to return to work. This makes all the more urgent the need to take control of the struggle out of the hands of the unions and mobilize the support of the entire working class.

Teachers and public workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* Wednesday evening expressed a mood of opposition and defiance.

Rikki, a young West Virginia state worker, told the WSWS, “Do not think they [the teachers] are accepting this. Teachers are saying they are not going back until they have something in writing. People are very angry. This has inspired the teachers in Kentucky to oppose their conditions. I think you have the beginning of a movement taking place.”

A school worker in Raleigh County in the southern coalfields said, “We are coming out [Thursday and Friday]. There will be no work at my school. We should stay out until we get PEIA paid. We had an agreement on PEIA, a contract and a promise. Then they put the insurance up so high and said we had to include our husbands’ income—no, no, no! Then they wanted us to wear a bracelet and count our steps and make our insurance based on our steps. They have jacked up the insurance so much!

“I do not agree with the union. They sold us out too fast. I was surprised the unions would go for this.”

Diana, a social studies teacher, said, “This is history being made. We are in this heavy-hearted because it’s our children. They portray us as money-hungry, but they are taking all our pay raises for PEIA. We work in

a poverty-stricken area. I couldn’t tell you how much money I pay out of my pocket. The last time I counted, it was over \$2,000. These kids don’t have the things they need.

“OK, it’s breaking the law [to strike], but the founding fathers broke the law to make the American Revolution, the civil rights movement broke the law, Mother Jones and the coal miners—they were all breaking the law.

“Do we feel betrayed? Yes we do. At the same time, we want to believe that we are being heard. However, today at the Capitol I heard a lot of teachers saying that if we are forced back to work, they are pulling their memberships [in the unions] tomorrow. They need to show us good faith and we didn’t see it today.”

The WSWS will do everything possible to assist in the formation of rank-and-file committees, to help establish lines of communication to unite teachers and public-sector workers with their class brothers and sisters throughout the US and internationally, and to take forward this struggle. We urge teachers to contact us, subscribe to our newsletter and take up this fight to broaden the struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>