

The West Virginia teachers strike and the rebellion against the trade unions

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Every major social conflict reveals in the movement of masses of people the nature of political tendencies and organizations, while it tests out and evaluates the validity of political conceptions. Such is the case with the strike by teachers in West Virginia.

The walkout by more than 30,000 teachers and school employees in the state, now entering its ninth day, is expanding. Yesterday, thousands of workers descended on Charleston, with long lines of workers winding around the state Capitol. As further evidence of a developing movement of the working class, 1,400 Frontier telecommunications workers in West Virginia and parts of Virginia walked off the job Sunday morning.

There is growing sentiment throughout the state and beyond for a general strike, and the courageous stand taken by West Virginia teachers is being closely followed and supported by workers around the world.

The escalation of class conflict refutes all those who proclaimed the death of the working class and the end of the class struggle, supposedly replaced by conflicts centered on race, gender and sexual orientation. Not only does the working class exist, it is resuming its forceful intervention into the course of history.

The developments in West Virginia are particularly significant because the workers in the state, who are predominantly white, have been consigned by the Democrats to the “basket of deplorables” (in the words of Hillary Clinton). According to the proponents of identity politics, they are “privileged,” benefiting from a system of “white supremacy” and, if they happen to be men, the “patriarchy.” In fact, the concerns of these workers are the concerns of the entire working class, of all races and genders.

Among the many issues revealed in the West Virginia strike is the relationship between the working class and the trade unions. The International Committee of the

Fourth International concluded in the early 1990s—in the aftermath of a wave of betrayals carried out by the US trade unions, including of miners in West Virginia, and similar betrayals internationally—that the unions could no longer be considered workers’ organizations. Their response to the globalization of production and the decline of American capitalism, rooted in their nationalist and pro-capitalist history and program, was to embrace corporatism and collaborate with management and the state in eliminating jobs and reducing the living standards of the working class.

As the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, explained in 1993, “The role of these bureaucratic apparatuses in every country has been transformed from pressuring the employers and the state for concessions to the workers, to pressuring the workers for concessions to the employers.” The growth of the class struggle, the Workers League insisted, would bring workers into ever more direct and open conflict with these anti-working class organizations.

This analysis has been entirely confirmed by the developments in West Virginia. From the beginning, the strike emerged outside of and increasingly in rebellion against the unions—in this case, the state affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA).

The strike emerged last month out of discussions teachers held in their schools, particularly in the impoverished mining counties in the south. It was not planned in the offices of trade union bureaucrats. In response to local walkouts and a groundswell of support among teachers throughout the state, the unions called a two-day strike, which they hoped would let off steam and allow them to work out a deal with the governor and state legislators.

The strike was then extended for two days before the

unions came back with a rotten agreement and called on teachers to go back to work. Again, teachers held impromptu meetings throughout the state and voted to reject a return to work. Now the union leaders are conspiring with Democratic and Republican politicians to find some way of shutting down the strike and imposing a defeat on the teachers.

At all costs, the unions want to prevent a broader mobilization. Asked by a reporter yesterday whether the unions would be organizing strikes in the 49 other states in the country, NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia responded with an emphatic “No!” In doing so, she was merely operating under the principle spelled out earlier this month by AFSCME lawyer David Frederick before the US Supreme Court, when he said “union security is the tradeoff for no strikes.”

The strike in West Virginia is a further development of the same conflict between workers and the union apparatus that has emerged in every significant struggle of the working class. The unions have worked to eliminate any organized resistance to the onslaught of the ruling class. When they have been unable to prevent a strike or demonstration—the mass protests in Wisconsin in 2011, the Chicago teachers strike in 2012, the New York City school bus drivers strike in 2013, the oil refinery workers strike in 2015, the Verizon strike and the Detroit teachers sickouts in 2016, among others—the unions have isolated workers and imposed defeats.

The West Virginia strike also follows the rebellion of auto workers in 2015 against the United Auto Workers, including the first rejection by workers of a union-backed national contract (at Fiat Chrysler) in 33 years. The UAW was able to force through the agreement only through a combination of lies, fraud and threats.

Masses of workers are beginning to recognize that they confront in the unions not their representatives, but their determined enemies. Why should they continue to financially support and accept the discipline of organizations that work actively against them?

The more the working class comes forward, the more violent will be the efforts of the unions to suppress its struggles, and the more apparent will be the need for workers to form independent organizations, rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees, to coordinate their struggles and fuse the

diverse expressions of opposition into a unified political movement against the government and the capitalist system.

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