

Movement for teacher walkouts in Oklahoma, Kentucky, New Jersey and Arizona

Spreading wave of working class unrest in the US follows West Virginia teachers strike

By Will Morrow
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In the wake of the unions' shutting down of a nine-day strike by 33,000 West Virginia public school employees on March 6, there are growing calls for strikes and protests by teachers and other sections of the working class throughout the United States, which are threatening to break free from the control of the trade unions.

The movement of workers is placing them in direct conflict with the entire ruling class and the Democratic and Republican parties. The dependence of the capitalist system on the continued suppression of wages was underscored on Friday, when a jobs report showing low wage increases led to sharp rise in the stock markets.

Education workers in Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky and New Jersey are demanding strike action. In Kentucky, several hundred education workers protested inside the state capitol building in Frankfort on Friday to oppose a planned Senate vote to cut the annual cost-of-living adjustment for teachers' pensions, already below inflation at 1.5 percent, by a third. Republican Senators announced that they were postponing a vote on the bill.

On Thursday, teachers in at least 28 schools across Kentucky organized "walk-ins," protesting outside school buildings before class and walking in together against the pension cut.

Stephanie Winkler, the Kentucky Education Association president, warned that the union may be forced to call a strike to maintain control over the workers. "We hope it doesn't have to come to that," she said.

On Tuesday night, the Oklahoma Education Association posted a notice on Facebook announcing a statewide strike on April 23. Within hours, facing a backlash from teachers demanding much more aggressive action, the union was forced to take the post down. It announced that the strike date had been brought forward to April 2, while still opposing a full walkout.

A Facebook page set up by an Oklahoma teacher, "Oklahoma Teachers Walkout—The Time is Now," grew to more than 60,000 members within a week. Teachers in Oklahoma are the lowest or second-lowest paid in the country, below West Virginia.

In Arizona, a Facebook page set up by a teacher this weekend, Arizona Educators United, has grown to over 26,000 members. Workers on the page are discussing holding strikes and sickouts, while the Arizona Education Association union has opposed calling any strike before 2019.

Late last month, more than 4,000 teachers in New Jersey voted for strike action.

The struggles of teachers are inspiring other sections of the working class. More than 1,400 Frontier workers in West Virginia and parts of Virginia are completing the first week of their strike against efforts by the telecommunications giant to slash full-time jobs and cut healthcare and other benefits.

Workers on the picket line spoke to WSWWS reporters on Tuesday expressed a growing sentiment for a united movement of the entire working class. Chris, a Frontier worker with nine years, said, "If all the teachers band together, and the same for us, if all the communication

workers band together, there's no fight we can't win.”

The growth of the class struggle is international in scope. Among the many strikes and protests that have developed over the past several weeks are:

- A strike by 300 workers at Windsor, Ontario's ZF-TRW auto parts facility, which began yesterday after workers rejected an agreement backed by the unions. The walkout has already forced the idling of the nearby Fiat Chrysler plant in Windsor.

- An ongoing 14-day strike by more than 40,000 lecturers at 57 universities across the UK against pension cuts.

- A strike by lecturers at public universities across Kenya over low pay and unpaid back pay that began on March 1.

- The closure of public schools across Argentina on Monday and Tuesday this week in a strike by tens of thousands of teachers against cuts to public education and declining real wages.

- An ongoing eight-day strike by more than 15,000 non-academic workers at Sri Lankan universities, who are demanding a 20 percent wage increase.

- A strike by more than 4,000 Iranian steel workers over non-payment of two months' wages and bonus arrears, now entering its third week.

The unions are highly conscious of their role in controlling social opposition, subordinating it to the Democratic Party and preventing demands for walkouts from developing in the direction of a general strike.

It was precisely the signs that the West Virginia teachers were winning the support of other sections of workers that made the teachers unions determined to shut it down. The American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia and the West Virginia Education Association cut a deal with the billionaire governor Jim Justice and state legislators which does nothing to address teachers' main demand for an end to rising health care costs. It provides a paltry five percent raise, which will be funded through cuts to social spending, including Medicaid, the healthcare program for the poor.

Underscoring the rotten character of the agreement, the state superintendent Steven Paine announced on Thursday that teachers will be forced to make up the nine days missed from the walkout. He advised local school boards to force teachers to work over the spring break.

In a series of worried articles and statements, the Democratic Party-aligned media and trade unions are warning about the implications of the loosening of the unions' straitjacket over workers. In the wake of the West Virginia teachers' rebellion, they warn that the *Janus v. AFSCME* case currently before the US Supreme Court—which would allow workers to opt out of paying union dues without having to pay “agency fees”—may further weaken the unions' ability to suppress the class struggle.

An article published in the *New York Times* on Thursday notes, “The West Virginia teachers found ways to organize and act outside the usual parameters of traditional unionism ... The lesson, experts said, is that undermining public sector unions, as the *Janus* case seeks to do, will not guarantee labor peace.”

On March 1, the *Washington Post* published an article by former AFT organizing director Shaun Richman, warning that “employers will not like the chaos” caused by weakening the unions, saying workers would “engage in wildcat strikes” and “look to more left-wing and militant organizations.”

The political lessons of the West Virginia teachers' struggle must be drawn by teachers and other workers in West Virginia, across the US and internationally. The incipient rebellion against the corporatized, anti-working class trade unions must be made conscious through the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, elected by and from among the workers, to turn out to and unify the struggle with other sections of the working class.

Workers must oppose the attempts by the unions to subordinate their struggles to appeals to the Democratic Party, which no less than the Republicans represents the interests of the major corporations and the military/intelligence agencies. The development of a powerful movement of the working class must be connected to a political struggle against both big business parties, escalating social inequality, war, and the capitalist system.

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