

As Trump's education secretary threatens deep education cuts

Teachers' struggle spreads to Oklahoma, Kentucky and Arizona

By E.P. Milligan
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In the aftermath of the nine-day strike by West Virginia teachers and school employees, the movement of rank-and-file teachers to win significant wage improvements and defend public education is continuing to gain momentum in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona and other states. The wave of protests and demands for statewide strikes takes place as the Trump administration prepares massive cuts to public education.

In a Sunday night interview on CBS-TV's "60 Minutes" program, US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos decried the "billions and billions and billions of dollars" the federal government has spent on education, "with zero results." DeVos continued, "We've begun looking at and rolling back a lot of the overreach of the federal government in education," and declared, "We should be funding and investing in students. Not in school buildings, not in institutions, not in systems."

The billionaire heiress is a long-time enemy of public education well known for buying state legislators in her home state of Michigan and other states who advance the corporate-backed program of "school choice," vouchers and charter schools. But this is not a solely a Republican agenda. It follows eight years of the Obama administration, which deliberately starved states and school districts of necessary funding while overseeing the destruction of hundreds of thousands of school employees' jobs, a fall in real wages and a diversion of public money to charter schools and other for-profit schemes.

Nearly a decade since the 2008 financial crash, many if not most states are still providing less school funding per pupil than they did before the Great Recession.

The upsurge of teachers has taken place largely outside of the control of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA),

which have spent decades assisting both big-business parties to impose layoffs and wage and benefit cuts, while blocking strikes or other forms of resistance.

The nine-day strike by West Virginia teachers and school employees, which was initiated by rank-and-file educators, became a powerful pole of attraction precisely because it broke free, at least temporarily, from the stranglehold of the unions when teachers rejected the order by the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV) to return to work on March 1 based on a "good faith" deal with the state's billionaire governor, Jim Justice. The walkout was shut down on March 7 when the unions backed a deal with Justice, which ignored the teachers' main demand to end soaring health care costs. To add insult to injury, the meager 5 percent raise will not be paid for by increasing taxes on the state's coal, natural gas and chemical corporations, but by slashing funding from other essential services.

Despite this betrayal, the rebellion in West Virginia has inspired teachers, school service workers and public employees everywhere. On Saturday, 32,000 state employees in Oklahoma voted to join an April 2 teachers' strike, which rank-and-file educators have called to demand a \$10,000 raise. According to data compiled by educators, 85 percent of teachers and 75 percent of parents support a walkout by educators, who like their counterparts in West Virginia rank near the bottom in the US in teacher salaries.

The Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) has sought to prevent any walkout. Instead, the union has told educators to place their faith in Democratic state legislators, who no less than the Republicans, defend the natural gas and other energy interests that run the state. After a vote by the state legislature to reject a \$5,000 raise

for teachers, rank-and-file teachers used Facebook groups, including, “Oklahoma Teachers United (OTU) and “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout—The Time is Now,” to call for a statewide strike.

In response to growing pressure, the OEA proposed a strike date for April 23. Teachers responded by holding meetings where they denounced the stalling operation. “Hoping to block our efforts to force a walkout on a sooner date,” the OTU group stated, the union agreed to set April 2 strike date.

Following this, however, the OTU group called on its supporters to “unite behind” the union, while acknowledging that teachers “express overwhelming concern that OEA or superintendents will try to minimize the importance of our desire for a \$5,000 raise with another \$5,000 to follow.”

The proposal to “unite behind” the OEA would be fatal for the teachers’ struggle, as the experience in West Virginia showed. The chief role of the unions is not to broaden the fight but to block strike action, subordinate the movement to the Democratic Party, and kill it. Sensing the danger posed by the proposal to “unite behind the OEA,” a rank-and-file teacher on the group’s Facebook page commented, “OEA has never stood up for us. They have taken our money for years and no changes. It’s time for teachers to stand up for themselves!”

In Arizona, the teacher unions are similarly seeking to derail a rank-and-file movement of educators. Teachers who have been protesting at the capitol building in Phoenix to oppose stagnating wages, increased class sizes and the lack of state funding, have called for a “Day of Action for Education” for March 28.

The president of the Arizona Education Association (AEA), Joe Thomas, has been regularly consulting with Dale Lee, the president of the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), who played the leading role in betraying the nine-day strike. According to NBC News, “With Lee’s encouragement, Thomas and his members adopted “small symbolic steps”: having teachers wear red, planning walk-ins and walkouts—all while they mull whether to strike.”

Any such consultations are for one purpose: reasserting the control of the unions and sabotaging any struggle. This was made clear by a post by an Arizona teacher on one of the Facebook pages school and public employees used to organize their strike.

“We in Arizona wore red last Wednesday in consolidation to make awareness to the fact of being 48th in the nation as far as pay vs. inflation. It was a grass

roots movement started by a local teacher based on the movement you all started in WV.

“Unfortunately, our state teachers union hijacked red and used the momentum to introduce a new candidate for governor. When they issued the press release that they were going to make an announcement we thought it was going to be something exciting like a deadline or something. Many of us are just disillusioned about the whole thing. Arizona has failed us! Our AEA has failed us!

“We have waited long enough. Teachers of Arizona and all states who shaft their teachers and schools only understand one thing. ULTIMATUMS! We want teachers and school personnel who feel underserved by their local governments, join Arizona and WEAR BLACK every Friday until school is out...To remind them that we all may not be there on MONDAY! PLEASE Join me and others as we continue to protest Educational Conditions in Arizona and in many other states as well. This is a new grass roots movement leaving party politics out of our struggle.”

This incipient rebellion against the unions must be consciously organized through the election of rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by the ranks of educators, and operating completely free of the control of the unions and the two big-business parties. These committees must appeal for the mobilization of the broadest sections of the working class to fight for vast expansion of funding for public education, the right to secure and good paying jobs, and fully funded health care and pensions for teachers, school service workers and all public employees.

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