

Teacher unions seek rotten deal as momentum grows for April 2 statewide walkout in Oklahoma

By Todd Denton and Nancy Hanover
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As teachers throughout Oklahoma prepare to strike Monday April 2, teacher unions held a press conference Friday—not to mobilize support, but to plead with legislators to adopt a new union-backed revenue plan. The deal would provide, at best, a band aid to education, while barely touching the profits of the state’s dominant industry, oil and gas, which heavily funds the PACs of legislators.

At the media event, Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) President Alicia Priest and American Federation of Teachers (AFT)-Oklahoma City President Ed Allen advocated their “revenue roadmap” as a means of averting a strike. Priest pleaded, “Oklahoma can avoid a teacher walkout.” She warned that 147 school boards have passed resolutions supporting educators who strike, emphasizing that only “the legislature can prevent a walkout”. The Oklahoma Public Employees Association has also announced its intention to strike April 2 without a “significant” pay raise.

The determination of the unions to impose a sellout deal was demonstrated by the raising of a series of inadequate demands. The plan, which spreads increases over three years, calls for \$10,000 in teacher raises; \$5,000 for support professionals, and \$200 million for schools for operational costs such as textbooks, transportation and additional teachers. The dire situation facing districts has prompted over 100 to enact a four-day class schedule. Meanwhile, there is a scandalous shortage of textbooks in many schools and nearly 2,000 teacher positions are filled by non-certified staff.

The OEA was already deeply discredited for its campaign to delay strike action to April 23. An outcry from rank and file teachers, galvanized by the courageous struggle of West Virginia teachers, forced the unions to move up the date to the start of the state testing period.

For their part, Democrats in the Oklahoma House back the reactionary union “roadmap,” issuing a proforma statement Friday claiming “this fight is as much about respect as it is revenue,” affirming they would like to work with Republicans. They are supporting HB 2152, authored by former bank CEO Republican speaker Charles McCall, as a means to “put a revenue package together.”

Presently, Oklahoma teachers rank 50th in the US in average salary and most educators have not seen an increase in a decade. State employees, similarly, have gone 8-10 years without a raise, with average salaries considered 24 percent below the competitive market rate.

The current demands for action gained national attention when students walked out in Tulsa, Kiefer and Bartlesville to support their teachers beginning in mid-February. Then the demand for the April 2 strike was initiated among rank-and-file teachers on social media, with the site “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout – The Time is Now” growing to over 70,000 members since the beginning of March.

On Wednesday, Academy Award winner actress, comedienne and singer Bette Midler tweeted her support to Oklahoma teachers: “Is this America? Teachers in Oklahoma make ends meet by SELLING THEIR BLOOD PLASMA! THEY ARE THE VICTIMS OF UNBELIEVABLE CUTBACKS! #STRIKE.”

A Tulsa public school teacher has now posted a call on Facebook for a 110-mile march from Tulsa to Oklahoma City, the state capital, on April 7, the second week of the proposed strike. The Tulsa Classroom Teachers Association and the Tulsa Public Schools administration say they are considering the idea.

“They have stripped us of some benefits, tenure, due process, and anything else they could,” a veteran teacher

told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Most have second ~~and~~ education.”

even third jobs just to stay afloat. We have been scared to speak out for a long time, but as we have seen our children stripped of the very necessities they need for a well-rounded education, we have finally started to speak. Much of our district was without heat and air for months. My room probably had a total of about three weeks of it working.”

State legislators have worked together across the aisle to slash income taxes for the wealthy since the mid-2000s, beginning under Democratic Governor Brad Henry and now resulting in annual revenue losses exceeding \$1 billion.

The “solution” which the unions are frantically seeking to impose places the onus of increased taxes not on the wealthy or the corporations, but on hard-pressed residents. It includes a series of regressive taxes designed to hit low-income Oklahoma residents—tax increases on cigarettes, beer, gaming and gasoline, packaged with a small increase in taxes on the oil and gas industry as well as income taxes. The proposal insults the intelligence of educators who are fully aware of the billions looted by the oil-and-gas companies in the state.

The press conference’s live Facebook feed demonstrated the hostility on the part of educators to the union-backed plan. “Sin taxes and taxes on the poor won’t get us there”, said Jim Ryan. “5 percent is way, way low” said another, referring to the small hike on oil-and-gas... “20 million tax for wind???? That(s) all?” said Aron Percy. “I vote for taking the tax cuts away from the wealthy and oil and gas” posted Anita Locke Haftek. Terri Mitchell concluded, “Oil and gas are the extortionists!”

“I have no faith in the legislature doing the right thing,” the veteran teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I have taught in Oklahoma or worked in schools since 1975 when I was still in high school and they have never treated education right. Still, as bad as it was then, it was nothing like what we have faced in the last decade. Twenty years ago, we walked out and it only took a short time for them to break the promises they made,” she warned.

“The group we have now has created a stranglehold on anyone trying to help education. Their superior numbers and corporate funding, oil and gas bribery, right wing Christian fanatics, ALEC loyalty, and the GOP agenda of destroying the public school system to replace it with for-profit schools, and even apparent blackmail has kept any faction of pro-education forces from getting any relief

The role of “oil and gas bribery,” is huge in Oklahoma. After millions of dollars in tax cuts, Oklahoma has the lowest-tax rate in the country for oil-and-gas drillers. Between 2008 and 2016, while per pupil spending in the state was slashed by 24 percent—the biggest cut in the nation—the fracking industry was booming, minting new millionaires and billionaires.

Eager to help in this process, state Democrats and Republicans voted to provide the industry an “incentive tax rate” of only one percent, at a cost of some \$800 million to the state treasury. In 2014, it doubled down on the tax-giveaway, voting by a 2-to-1 margin to make these rates permanent. This handed another \$470 million to the industry in 2015 alone.

The oil boom turned Oklahoma City into a profit hub for Devon Energy, Chesapeake Energy and Continental Resources. State revenue data reviewed by Reuters show the horizontal-drilling tax breaks topped \$1 billion between 2012-2015. Other big businesses have also reaped gargantuan tax cuts at the expense of education. The wind industry, for example, received tax credits and exemptions worth \$306 million from 2004-2015, according to the Oklahoma Tax Commission.

Teacher Jason Mcphail noted on social media, “We are not poor. We have oil and natural gas, and the 15th highest paid politicians in the country. We are not poor. We are being robbed.” He emphasized that Oklahoma is among the most deficient in three categories: lowest teacher pay, lower education funding and highest rates of incarceration.

Librarian Michelle Howell, expressed the thoughts of most teachers, saying, “We’ve been told today to take little steps at a time, but I think that’s really hard for us because they haven’t proven to us in the last 10, 15, 20 years that it’s going to happen.” Another educator, Michael Webb, stated, “My students are ready to walk with us. Very good group of kids. They know when they have been ‘done wrong’ as they say it.”

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