

“We need to stop putting profits above pupils”

As Oklahoma strike enters fourth day, students speak out in support of teachers

By Jerry White
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The powerful strike by nearly 40,000 Oklahoma teachers has entered its fourth day, with educators and their supporters pressing ahead with demands for significant pay raises and a sharp increase in funding for the state’s 700,000 public school students. Most districts have closed schools today due to the walkout, with many other canceling classes through Friday.

Educators have shown no signs of retreat, despite the hostile reception to their demands by the governor and the state legislature, and the efforts by the teacher unions to limit the struggle to impotent appeals to the politicians in both corporate-controlled parties.

On Wednesday, thousands of teachers, students, parents and other workers once again filled the state capitol in Oklahoma City to capacity, while thousands of others marched outside the building. High school and middle school students held a rally to express solidarity with their teachers.

Also on Wednesday, more than 50 teachers from Tulsa embarked on a 110-mile march to the state capitol. They plan to walk about 15-18 miles per day, with rest stops at gas stations and overnight stays in high school gyms. They will be joined by hundreds more during the route of the seven-day march for public education.

The battle in Oklahoma is part of an ongoing movement by educators across the US following the nine-day strike in West Virginia. Teachers in the US and internationally are demanding the restoration of deep cuts over the last decade and an end to the corporate-driven campaign to privatize and dismantle public education.

As in other states, the struggle in Oklahoma was initiated by rank-and-file educators who have used social media to organize opposition after years of betrayals by the teachers unions, which have collaborated in the erosion of living standards and classroom conditions.

“We had to set the fire because all the unions want is peace,” Dusty Hendon, an Oklahoma City Public Schools

teacher with 21 years of experience, told the *World Socialist Web Site* outside the capitol Wednesday. “The OEA is acting like they started this bandwagon, but it was ordinary teachers on Facebook pages like ‘Oklahoma Teachers Walkout-The Time is Now!’ who began this.

“We are fighting for funds for our kids. We are lacking the resources we need to teach in our classrooms, and they are not helping us out, they’re not listening. It’s happening all across the country, education is not getting the resources it needs.

“The state governments have the wrong priorities. It’s all about slashing taxes for the oil companies and other corporations.” Pointing to the Phillips 66 oil well right in front of the state capitol, she said, “That’s what important to the state legislators, not public education.”

Responding to the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter’s* call for teachers to elect rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions, Dusty said, “We need a nationwide organization of teachers; better yet, it should go global.”

The state affiliates of the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are working desperately to prevent Oklahoma teachers from linking up with their counterparts in Arizona, Kentucky, Florida and other states for a unified fight. Instead, the unions have dropped the teachers’ demands for a \$10,000 raise and the restoration of funding to pre-2008 levels. They have offered to end the strike if state legislators offer some gesture of a modest funding increase.

Having long ago taken the measure of the unions, Republican Governor Mary Fallin and state legislators from both parties are refusing to budge from the insulting pay and school-funding bill passed last week, which is based on the union’s proposal for regressive taxes on cigarettes and fuel. Although the unions continue to call this sham “historic,” it would do nothing to lift teacher pay and per pupil funding from near bottom levels in the US.

In comments to CBS News, Fallin arrogantly said, “Teachers want more, but it’s kind of like having a teenage kid that wants a better car.” She then ominously blamed “outside groups,” including “Antifa,” for supposed unrest at the state capitol. This is a repeat of the lying claims made by Republican legislatures the day before—that they had received “death threats” from paid protesters from “Chicago and California,” which is being used to criminalize protest and silence dissent.

State Democrats, for their part, are posturing as champions of the teachers, even though the Democrats on the state and federal level, including former President Obama, cut public education and other services just as ruthlessly as the Republicans. State Democrats, knowing they can never get it past the Republican-controlled House, have called for the repeal of capital gains reduction, which would add \$100 million in annual revenue. But these cuts, along with a reduction in the top income tax, were spearheaded by Fallin’s Democratic predecessor, Brad Henry.

In a clear effort to demoralize teachers, OEA President Alicia Priest and Princess Moss, the president of the Virginia Education Association and a NEA executive board member, told teachers Wednesday that all they could do was continue to beg these big-business politicians to “do their jobs” and vote for Democrats in November.

“How many of you are willing to knock doors for a candidate that supports you and reach into your own pockets and give to a candidate who supports you?” Priest asked teachers at a rally outside the capitol Wednesday afternoon. “It will take more than us showing up these days to effect change in Oklahoma. We have to have a sustained path forward.”

Far from a “sustained way forward,” turning teachers into vote-pushers for the Democrats is aimed at smothering the teachers’ rebellion and subordinating educators to a big-business political party that will slash school funding for years to come.

This makes clear why Oklahoma teachers must break from these anti-working class organizations that call themselves “unions” and consciously link their struggle with teachers and other workers across the country in preparation for a general strike.

In comments at the capitol Wednesday, middle and high school students passionately expressed their determination to join teachers and other workers in a genuine fight.

Alexis Broderick, a senior at Midwest City High School, said, “I’m here because I want to change the world. I want to change the world to make it better for my 12-year-old sister. I want her to have her own books. I want her to sit on a desk that does not rip her jeans because of the sharp edges that have been left broken years ago. I want her to walk

through hallways free of black mold. Is that really asking too much?

“I want to change the world for our teachers. I want them to go home at night—not to their second or even third jobs. I know they got a raise, and I’m happy for them, but it is still not what they are worth.

“I want to change the world as a whole. I want to live in a world where gun violence, racism and cancer are eradicated, where I’m not preparing for a mass shooting in every public place. Where the peoples’ voice is the voice of the nation.”

Another student, the daughter of a teacher, said, “How is it that my mom is being called greedy because she wants her students to have a proper education? The support of this walkout by students is essential. This walkout is for us. Our teachers are just leading it.”

Jill Overstreet of Bethany High School said, “Growing up in an Oklahoma school, I thought ripped textbooks and bringing in supplies for extra credit was normal. I thought being in a classroom with 30 other kids was normal.

“It wasn’t until later I realized the struggles teachers face: the struggles to buy their kids shoes or pay for gas to their second job. The struggle of paying for new art supplies because the football field had to be renovated. To maintain the love they have for their job while trying to maintain their bills from paycheck to paycheck. We cannot settle for this. Us students are here to fight with the teachers to help them get what they deserve. History has its eyes on us.”

Ravi Patel, senior at Southmoore High School said, “We have proven that despite being teenagers, we will no longer sit idly by as our teachers are persecuted for fighting for an equitable education. In a perfect world, no teacher should have to fight day in and day out for an adequate salary.

“Even Thomas Jefferson noted the influence of an educated electorate and public education on the preservation of our nation’s freedom, and that was more than 200 years ago. So don’t let them tell you the funds don’t exist. They’re sitting right on them. Those sitting in Oklahoma’s Capitol Hill shouldn’t be building themselves a hill of capital. We need to stop putting profits above pupils. We need to stop putting budgets above our best and brightest. Most importantly, we need to stop putting funds above our future.”

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