

Oklahoma teachers strike to continue next week, after state Senate passes derisory funding bill

By Will Morrow
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The strike by teachers in Oklahoma will continue into its second week on Monday, following the passage on Friday of a derisory spending bill by the Oklahoma Senate.

The Oklahoma Education Association (OEA), working in collaboration with Democratic and Republican lawmakers, is seeking to end the strike by Tuesday. The union praised the senate's action on Friday and called for two additional measures that will do nothing to meet the demands of the teachers.

OEA President Alicia Priest declared Friday, "Today the legislature started to hear us." Priest was referring to the revenue and tax bill that is expected to raise \$20 million from an internet sales tax and \$24 million from the legalization of "ball and dice" gambling in the state. Both are regressive taxes that would siphon more money from the working class in Oklahoma—including the parents of many of the students that teachers serve every day.

Priest called for the Senate to take the additional measure of removing capital gains exemptions, saying that this would add an additional \$100 million in revenue, and for Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin to veto the repeal of a tax on guests at hotels and motels—another regressive measure.

The OEA has dropped all references to the main demands initially raised by teachers, including an immediate \$10,000 pay raise for teachers, a \$5,000 pay raise for school support staff, and \$200 million in additional school funding. These measures would themselves not make up for a decade in which real school funding has been cut by more than 28 percent, or an average of \$1,000 per pupil each year.

After the OEA published a notice Thursday night declaring that the bills before the Senate could "turn the

tide for education in Oklahoma and provide the additional funding our students deserve," teachers responded with comments opposing the effort to impose a sellout.

Lindey Robbins commented, "It's time for OEA to have a clear and concise ask that teachers can get behind and stop the flip flopping or get out of the way!" Another worker, Amy Forister, said, "Please explain to your members what OEA's stance is as of right now!! Are we about to settle and walk away with a huge gap in the budget?!" Samantha Hendrix commented, "Clarification please!! Does this mean OEA wants to settle? We are not ready to settle. It is nowhere near what we asked for."

On Thursday night, Alberto Morejon, an Oklahoma teacher who initiated the Facebook page "Oklahoma Teachers Walkout—The Time is Now!" posted a statement pointing to the OEA's efforts to shut down the strike. Morejon stated that after he called on Thursday afternoon for the strike to continue, a "high up" OEA official complained to him that he had "cost us \$17,000 for busses tomorrow" to bring teachers to the state capital.

At the outset, the OEA and the American Federation of Teachers sought to prevent a strike. Priest initially hailed as "historic" a last-minute deal by lawmakers on March 29 aimed at averting a strike. It provided a \$6,000 pay raise—approximately half of what teachers demanded—and no significant additional school funding.

When teachers rejected the deal, the unions responded by seeking to channel the strike behind support for the Democratic Party, telling teachers that the only way to defend public education was to vote in the November 2018 elections.

The unions initially hoped to limit the strike to one day, but they have not had control over the situation. Their fear now is that if they back a deal that teachers won't accept, they could face a revolt like that which occurred

during the nine-day teachers strike in West Virginia.

The unions are trying to wear down teachers with fruitless appeals to Democratic lawmakers. At the same time, they are maneuvering with the legislature to make some gesture that they can sell to end the strike, while counting on a return to work in rural areas.

Above all, the unions want to block any national mobilization of teachers and other sections of the working class. In Kentucky, where teachers have engaged in mass sickouts and protests against a bill slashing pensions, the unions are telling workers not to take further action on Monday.

The Kentucky Education Association released a statement Friday repeating the lie of the media and politicians that any action by teachers will harm students. "Our students need us to show up for them in classrooms and schools," it said. "We urge educators statewide not to allow our united efforts to be compromised by continued calls for action that deprive students, parents and communities of the educational services we provide."

In Oklahoma as in Kentucky, the unions are promoting the lie that teachers have supporters in the Democratic Party. In a speech Thursday, Democratic Representative Scott Inman declared that Democrats had been "fighting for public education for year after year after year," adding, "without you being here, none of this would have happened, so you need to know, whatever happens next week, this has been an enormous success for you."

In fact, the cut in the capital gains tax, which Democrats are now claiming they oppose, was spearheaded by Fallin's Democratic predecessor, Brad Henry. Both Democrats and Republicans supported a series of bills passed between 2004 and 2007 that cut the top state income tax rate from 7 percent to 5.5 percent.

A report put out by the Oklahoma Policy Institute notes that the income tax cut has cost more than \$1 billion per year to the total budget, including \$356 million for education. In other words, the protracted decline in public education funding is the direct result of the transfer of wealth to the corporate elite, supported by both the Democrats and the Republicans.

The cuts to public education were part of savage attacks on all areas of social spending. According to the Oklahoma Policy Institute, from 2009 to 2016 Health Department funding fell by 19 percent, Arts Council funding by 32 percent, and the Department of Environmental Quality budget by 30 percent.

Moreover, the tax incentive for horizontal oil drilling—supported by the Democrats and

Republicans—cost the state \$1 billion between 2002 and 2015.

The attempt by the unions to sell out the strike in Oklahoma is taking place as teachers are winning ever-broader support. This year has already seen strikes and demonstrations by teachers in West Virginia, New Jersey, Arizona, Kentucky and other states. There are growing calls for a nationwide strike that would connect the fight of teachers with the struggles of all sections of the working class for quality jobs, wages, health care and pensions.

To carry forward the struggle in Oklahoma, teachers must break completely with the unions, which are working consciously to isolate their strike and impose a defeat. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees to expand the strike by appealing to teachers and workers throughout the country for joint action, including preparations for a general strike.

The fight for high-quality public education is pitting teachers against the entire political establishment and the two big business parties, which defend the wealth and power of the ruling class.

The unions' promotion of bills adding a few tens of millions of dollars through regressive taxes on the working class must be seen in the context of a social counterrevolution that has been carried out by both parties to destroy all the social gains won by the working class. Neither party will touch the immense wealth of the corporate and financial elite, including the giant oil and gas companies.

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