

Oklahoma struggle continues as calls for teacher strikes spread across US

By Jerry White and Niles Niemuth
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Large numbers of Oklahoma teachers are expected to show up at the state capitol today to continue their fight for improved wages and school funding despite the concerted effort by the unions, school district authorities and the media to pressure educators to end their two-week strike.

After failing to prevent the strike, which was initiated on April 2 by rank-and-file teachers using social media, the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and smaller Oklahoma City-American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have done nothing but try to sabotage it. Last Thursday, OEA President Alicia Priest abruptly announced that the union was calling off the strike. The OEA falsely claimed that teachers had won 95 percent of their demands and that educators could do nothing more than vote for Democrats in November.

On Friday, thousands of teachers, defying the OEA, descended on the state capitol. Over the weekend, they networked with each other to organize sickouts and other forms of protest as schools reopen today.

“OEA ran out in front of our train which was gaining momentum and started acting like they were leading the train and then said they were stopping the train,” Jane, a teacher from a rural Oklahoma District, said during an online meeting Sunday afternoon sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter*. “There are a bunch of us that aren’t stopping.

“There are some schools that have said this is not over, the OEA doesn’t speak for us and we didn’t get anything,” Jane added. “The legislature didn’t do anything for us in the two weeks we marched and lobbied that they weren’t already going to do. We’re still dealing with horrid working conditions and overcrowded classrooms. They didn’t give us as much as we wanted for textbooks, and we haven’t had new ones in thirteen years.”

Ron, a high school teacher from Oklahoma City, added, “It really seems like it’s a dog and pony show. The union wasn’t expecting any different outcome. We should rally everyone in front of the OEA office to cancel their memberships. I’m not a member of either union, and I

dropped the AFT because they wouldn’t take any action like this.”

Given a green light by the unions, some school authorities are stepping up efforts to intimidate militant teachers. In the small town of Prague, 57 miles east of Oklahoma City, a popular high school wrestling coach and history teacher, Jason McPhail, was fired for refusing to leave the teacher walkout last week.

In a Facebook post, McPhail said, “To me, education is a basic human right in any modern society... I have watched my wife for eight years now struggle in the classroom as funding has continuously been supplanted or cut and enrollment has risen 30 percent. So when a walkout was threatened after a bill was passed that had almost no additional funding, I was all for walking out.

“I was given a choice/ultimatum...to go back to school or continue to walk and possibly not be rehired... My decision was to continue to walk.”

In a poll taken on the Facebook page, “Oklahoma Teacher Walkout—The Time is Now!” 88.3 percent of teachers said they are still in favor of the teacher walkout. However, the group is calling for teachers to individually decide to take sick days or personal days off to continue the protest, which a majority says they cannot afford.

While “The Time is Now!” and a similar Facebook page “Oklahoma Teachers United” (OTU) played a prominent role in the walkout, the leaders of these groups, Alberto Morejon and Larry Cagle, have no viable perspective to continue the fight. Like the unions, both are urging teachers, parents and students to limit their activities to “lobbying” legislators to increase school funding. The OTU has also banned the posting of WSWs articles on its page.

The last two weeks have demonstrated the bankrupt character of such a perspective. Oklahoma’s Republican Governor Mary Fallin and the state legislature have steadfastly refused any increased funding after handing billions in tax cuts to the oil and gas corporations.

The Democrats, for their part, have cynically claimed to defend public education even though it was Fallin’s

Democratic predecessor, Brad Henry, who imposed savage budget cuts to finance his cuts in capital gains and income taxes for the state's multimillionaires. The Obama administration oversaw the victimization of teachers and the attack on public education, which have paved the way for the policy of the Trump administration.

OTU leader Cagle has insisted the fight for educational funding is "not a political struggle." But the assault on public education is the result of definite political decisions, made not only in Oklahoma, but across the US and the world, which are aimed at defending the interests of a definite social class: the corporate and financial elite. Therefore, the struggle to defend public education is a *political struggle* because it requires the mobilization of the working class to fight for its class interests, which can only be achieved through a frontal assault on entrenched wealth and power of the capitalist class.

Oklahoma is just one of 29 states that have reduced school spending since 2008. The real wages of teachers have fallen in Oklahoma since 1999-2000, even as the cost of living has gone up 50 percent.

A recent study by the Democratic Party-aligned Brookings Institute warned of possible strikes in Mississippi, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Idaho, New Mexico, South Carolina, South Dakota and Utah. "In recent days," the author of the study, Dr. Michael Hansen of the Brown Center on Education Policy, wrote, "rumors of gathering calls for action have been reported in Indiana and Texas. Further teacher action in North Carolina seems almost inevitable, with a call for a march on the state Capitol set for a date next month."

Teachers are also setting up Facebook pages in Florida, Michigan, Iowa and other states to fight for collective action.

Teachers in Colorado—who are 46th in the nation in pay—are expected to protest at the state capitol in Denver today, after officials were forced to close schools in the Denver-Aurora metropolitan area in anticipation of the walkout.

Last Friday, thousands of teachers in Kentucky descended on the state capitol in Frankfort to defend their pensions. This prompted warnings against strikes by the Kentucky Education Association, and a right-wing diatribe by Governor Matt Bevin blamed striking teachers for abandoning children to sexual abuse, violence and drugs.

The WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* held an online call Sunday to urge teachers to form rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, to link with teachers across the US to fight for a nationwide strike. The meeting was attended by teachers from Oklahoma, Arizona, Michigan, Wisconsin, New York, California and other

states. It also heard a report from the United Kingdom about the strike by 50,000 university lecturers, just betrayed by the unions, and the international scope of the teachers' rebellion.

"In Michigan we were forerunners in terms of the destruction of the public education system," Patricia, a retired Detroit teacher, said. "If you are waiting for the AFT and the other unions to come in and support you, don't hold your breath! They have been a part of this operation for decades."

She added, "The charter system is being used to destroy the public education system. Many of our politicians have their own charter schools which their family members run, as well as many churches. If we don't unite in terms of workers, it's easy for us to be defeated. It has to be a united effort, we have to take the blindfolds off and see what has been going on for the last three to four decades. They can find money to go and fight wars and send our children and loved ones to die all over this world but when it comes to us they do not care."

Referring to the recent announcement by Arizona Governor Doug Ducey, who claimed he would give teachers a 10 percent pay raise next year, and 5 percent raise in each of the following two years, Laura, a teacher from Tucson, said, "We're suspicious because where are the cuts going to come from to give us this pay raise? We're being told to be happy, but we are not just fighting for pay raises, we're fighting for our kids and the future of education as a whole. I am completely with you. Why not have a general strike of working-class people, and especially teachers around the country, to let them know we're serious about education."

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