

Outrage grows over union effort to shut down Arizona teachers strike

By David Moore
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Striking teachers in Arizona are outraged by the effort by the Arizona Education Association (AEA) and the Facebook group Arizona Educators United (AEU) to send them back to work without obtaining teacher and support staff raises and the restoration of school funding to pre-2008 levels.

On Tuesday evening AEA President Joe Thomas and AEU founder Noah Karvelis announced they would endorse the same budget proposal teachers rejected when nearly 60,000 educators began their strike last Thursday. “What we have right now is the most we could possibly get through this avenue,” declared Karvelis.

The ostensibly rank-and-file controlled AEU group, which was set up with the backing of the union, instructed teachers to return to work as soon as the budget gets passed by the state legislature, which is expected by Thursday. This comes just after 93 percent of AEU site liaisons voted to continue the strike over the weekend.

Given the greenlight by the union, school districts have indicated they will reopen Thursday. “I got a text to return to work by my school district,” a Phoenix teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The districts are threatening to take disciplinary action if teachers don’t report to work. They’re trying to split teachers, threaten them and destroy this movement.”

Like the betrayal of the strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma, the deal accepted by the union does nothing to address the decades-long deterioration of living standards and classroom conditions. Although Governor Doug Ducey said he would give teachers a 20 percent pay hike the Republican governor’s budget proposal does not give direct raises, just extra funding to school districts.

At least 58 districts would not receive enough to actually give the 20 percent raise promised by Ducey. Many school districts could use the money to cover other pressing needs, including maintenance and repairs of school buildings, or pit teachers and other school

employees in a competition for scarce resources.

The plan would restore only \$400 million in funding, less than half of the \$1.1 billion that has been cut since 2008. The raises included in the budget do not include support staff who are frequently paid near the minimum wage. Neither does the budget establish a salary schedule with specified yearly raises for experienced teachers. In other words, the deal backed by the AEA and AEU ignores every single one of the demands teachers endorsed when they voted by 78 percent to strike.

The AEU made this decision without consulting its members, many of whom took to the organization’s Facebook page to denounce it. “This is not a win. I read the deal—What’s different about it then what was proposed and rejected last week?” said Robyn. “Are we seriously going back? After nothing has changed? After a couple days? After a historic show of solidarity? WHY THE HELL DID WE WALK-OUT THEN?” David posted.

In a post that the AEU quickly deleted along with other critical statements, Kimberly said, “It’s not over but there are many educators waiting to speak RIGHT NOW and hundreds that have already spoken asking for a NO vote. The movement just sold them out—made their testimonials worthless in the eyes of legislators not backing us. Now all they have to do is pass a crap budget to get this all over with.”

A number of posts said the AEA and AEU had no right to speak for striking teachers. “We will return to classrooms?” Mac posted. “When were we consulted about this? Disappointed in leadership right now. I was behind you all the way until now.” Marilyn added, “I was surprised to watch live footage of our leaders announcing “our” position. This decision does not represent MY position.”

“Somehow we did all this group consensus to start the walkout and two people unilaterally decided to end it

without our input,” Heather posted. “Noah and the other union flunkies are giving up but that doesn’t mean we have to. You don’t need their permission to continue the fight,” Phil wrote.

“They have called off the walkout claiming we haven’t gotten what we want, but that we’ve made progress. NOT ENOUGH.” Brooke wrote. “We are just now getting to the point where we should keep pushing, but the wind has been taken from the sails and the governor and legislature know we will roll over and acquiesce. This does not feel like a win. The budget that is about to pass is not adequate and will continue to leave public education improperly funded.”

“This is a naked sellout,” said William. “The union is shutting down the strike with AEU’s support under conditions where there is overwhelming support.” Patricia added, “Excuse me, but I haven’t voted yet AND I VOTE NO. I’m seriously in it for change. NOW. I didn’t go down to the Capitol to make friends. And if we don’t go back, what can they do? We are no better off than before the walkout. A moral victory is awful. Where are the details? Where is the communication?”

The betrayal of the strike occurred the day after a visit by American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten to Arizona. Weingarten and other executives from the AFT and National Education Association (NEA) have been traveling across the country in an effort to stop the spread of the teacher’s strikes from coalescing into a nationwide offensive. Asked by a WSWs reporter about the growing calls for a nationwide strike, Weingarten insisted that teacher’s struggles were only “statewide” issues, and that the unions wanted to transform the wave of walkouts into “walk-ins” into the voting booth to elect Democrats in November.

Once again, the unions have demonstrated that they are not genuine workers’ organizations, but organizations of strikebreakers and scabs. The sellout of the Arizona strike followed the same pattern as West Virginia and Oklahoma. First the unions opposed any strike action at all. Confronted with a groundswell of opposition and wildcat actions initiated by rank-and-file teachers utilizing social media, the union then postured as champions of their struggle. The AFT and NEA then limited the actions to demoralizing appeals to corporate controlled politicians and then declared that continuing the walkout was pointless because state governments refused to budge. All that teachers could do, the unions insisted, was to vote for Democrats in November.

One of the main differences between Arizona and

earlier struggles is that from the beginning the “independent” Facebook group Arizona Educators United where teachers discussed grievances and prepared to walkout outside of the union was a false flag. The AEU was founded by Karvelis after discussion with AEA president Joe Thomas, received union support from the very beginning and many of the AEU leaders are themselves union “activists.” Those deep-running connections explain the speed with which the AEU censored critical voices, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, and then worked to sell out the strike.

Rank-and-file teachers should reject this sellout and use today to organize meetings and vote against any return to work. The meetings should elect rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, to mobilize the broadest support throughout the working class to defend the strike and oppose any threats to victimize teachers. At the same time an appeal must go out to teachers in Colorado, Kentucky, South Carolina and other states to prepare a nationwide strike to defend the right to high-quality public education.

A break with the unions also requires a break with their political subordination of the working class to the two corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend. The fight to defend the right to a living wage, health care and pensions, and to fully fund public education and other essential services, will require a political struggle by the entire working class against capitalism and the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate and financial elite.

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