

How Jacobin and the ISO assisted in the betrayal of the Arizona teachers' strike

By Will Morrow
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The International Socialist Organization and *Jacobin* magazine, affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, bear direct responsibility for the unions' betrayal of the six-day strike of tens of thousands of Arizona teachers.

The strike ended on May 4, after the Arizona Education Association (AEA) and the nominally independent pro-union front group, Arizona Educators United (AEU), ordered teachers back to work without a vote and accepted the Republican governor's pay and funding plan that teachers overwhelmingly rejected just a week earlier. To steamroll opposition, the AEU deleted critical comments from its Facebook group and banned teachers who opposed the ending of the strike.

Both the ISO and *Jacobin* promoted the AEA and the AEU throughout the strike and have responded to their sellout by defending them. This follows their support for the betrayal of the teachers' strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma in March and April by the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, which have isolated the expanding strike wave of teachers on a state-by-state basis and blocked a unified nationwide struggle.

The agreement in Arizona provides only \$400 million in school funding, less than half the \$1.1 billion cut over the previous decade. For teachers without a homeroom class, and for the thousands of school support staff, such as school bus drivers, custodians and instructional aides, it provides nothing at all. Teachers, many of whom deliver pizzas and drive Ubers after school to make ends meet, will likely see a pay increase of 4 or 5 percent.

After promoting the AEA and AEU throughout the strike, the ISO has responded with silence to this sellout. A reader of *Socialist Worker* would not even know the strike is over.

Jacobin's sole article on the end of the strike, published May 3, is a friendly interview by the magazine's on-the-spot reporter in Arizona, Eric Blanc, not with rank-and-file teachers, but the AEU leaders who helped betray it: Noah Karvelis, Rebecca Garrelli and Dylan Wegela. Blanc provides the AEU leaders with the opportunity to issue lying rationalizations for shutting down the strike.

Blanc asked the AEU leaders, for example, why they decided not to continue the walkout if they did not support the agreement. Karvelis replied, "Our thought was that if they [the

legislature] would have conceded more to us, it would already have happened by now." He adds, "We were getting a lot of pressure ... to go back to our classrooms. And if we stayed out ... classified staff—who don't get paid during a walkout—would continue not to receive checks."

In other words, the strike was ended because ... the legislature did not want to accept the teachers' demands. But this was true from the beginning and was what the strike was about. As for the claim that teachers were under a lot of "pressure" to end the strike, this was not coming from workers—who overwhelmingly support the struggle of teachers—but from the ruling class and its political representatives.

Karvelis, moreover, is aware that the teachers were fighting for a pay raise for all staff, including certified workers; and that it was the union and AEU who imposed an agreement that provided nothing for certified workers, while refusing any strike pay for classified staff.

The AEU and the union shut down the strike because they were hostile to expanding it and making an appeal to teachers and other workers in other states—including in Colorado, where teachers had walked out at the same time—for a common struggle. The union's aim, from the outset, was to channel teachers' opposition behind the election of Democrats in November 2018, which the AEA has already endorsed.

The AEU was initiated at the beginning of March 2018, following discussions between Noah Karvelis, a 23-year-old Arizona music teacher who had previously been paid for consulting work in the election campaign of a local Democratic Party politician, and Joe Thomas, the president of the AEA.

The unions were anxious to prevent the growing movement of teachers from breaking outside of their control, as occurred temporarily at the beginning of March in West Virginia, when teachers defied a back-to-work order by the unions and voted independently to remain out on strike. From the outset, the purpose of the AEU—with the support of the ISO and *Jacobin*—was to serve as a nominally "grassroots" and independent organization, while preventing workers from breaking from the union as the latter worked to betray the strike.

This was spelled out in an article by *Jacobin* on April 26, which noted with satisfaction that "a critical factor enabling the rise of Red for Ed has been the active support of the AEA...

Union president Joe Thomas and vice-president Marisol Garcia have backed the movement just as enthusiastically.”

The article quoted AEU head Noah Karvelis declaring that the “union’s help has been invaluable... They’ve let us retain our position up in front of the movement, which is 100 percent rank-and-file led. This has been an incredibly powerful collaboration—I think it’s a great model for other states, particularly those with right-to-work restrictions.”

Karvelis’ reference to a “model” for states with “right-to-work” laws, which have undermined the financial base of the unions, is significant. The teachers’ strikes in Oklahoma, West Virginia and Arizona have taken place in states where the unions have been weaker, and thus less able to control and dissipate workers’ anger and secure “labor peace.”

More broadly, the unions are aware and fearful of a growing strike movement among workers internationally, which is developing in direct opposition to the pro-corporate union apparatuses that have overseen decades of attacks on workers’ conditions, and of the need to find new mechanisms for maintaining their straitjacket over the workers. Karvelis’ proposal is for the extension of such nominally “rank-and-file” organizations which are in fact auxiliary agencies of the anti-working-class unions.

This is precisely the perspective of the ISO and *Jacobin*. This was demonstrated in the course of the 10-day Oklahoma teachers’ strike, which saw tens of thousands of teachers join Facebook pages, including “Oklahoma Teachers United” (13,000 members) and “Oklahoma Teachers Walkout—the Time is Now” (46,000) as they were pushing for a strike.

The administrators of the pages, however, including Tulsa teacher Larry Cagle of OTU and Alberto Morejon of OTW, were opposed to carrying out any struggle independently of the OEA. This allowed the union to eventually take control of the strike, which it shut down on April 13, without achieving a single one of the teachers’ demands.

In an article published on March 30, three days before the strike began, the ISO’s *Socialist Worker* called on OTU to use its Facebook page to “organize a campaign to persuade the nearly 30,000 educators who aren’t in the union to join it. Then there are questions about the future of the OTU. Should it be formalized as a rank-and-file caucus? What demands should it make of union leaders, and what proposals for reforming and democratizing union structures should it raise?”

The claim that the unions can be “reformed” to defend workers’ interests is a lie. The transformation of the trade unions internationally over the past three decades into pro-corporate labor management businesses, who collaborate with employers to reduce working-class living standards and break strikes, is rooted objectively in their pro-capitalist and nationalist perspective, which has been fatally undermined by the globalization of the capitalist production process.

The upper-middle class social layers for which the ISO, *Jacobin* and other pseudo-left organizations speak, are terrified

of any movement of the working class that threatens to break free from the unions’ control. Their call for “rank-and-file caucuses” within the unions is aimed at securing highly-paid and influential positions within the union bureaucracy for themselves. Were they to take control of the unions, they would be no less willing than their predecessors in imposing sellouts on the workers.

This is the lesson of the Chicago teachers’ strike in 2012. The Chicago Teachers Union betrayed the courageous nine-day strike by 26,000 teachers, handing a major victory to Democratic Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel. Within months, Emmanuel proceeded to close 49 elementary schools and one high school.

The CTU’s betrayal was all the more significant because the union was led by a nominally “left” faction, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE). The vice president of the CTU, Jesse Sharkey, a leader of CORE, is a member of the ISO.

Unlike the various upper-middle class pseudo-left organizations, the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party have fought throughout the teachers’ strikes to warn workers against the betrayals of the unions, and to advocate for the formation of genuinely democratic, rank-and-file committees, elected by the workers and independent from the unions and both corporate-controlled parties, to carry forward their struggle.

The author also recommends:

Lessons of the teachers strike in West Virginia
[8 March 2018]

The betrayal of the Oklahoma strike and lessons for the next stage of the teachers’ revolt
[18 April 2018]

Jacobin, International Socialist Organization claim “victory” in West Virginia teachers sellout
[9 March 2018]

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