

Five months after strike, West Virginia teachers say “nothing has changed”

By Nancy Hanover
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As West Virginia educators and school workers return for the 2018–19 school year, their conditions of work remain, for all intents and purposes, the same as when they began their courageous statewide wildcat strike last February. In a dirty double-cross, the unions forced through a paltry 5 percent wage bump—for teachers whose salaries were 48th in the nation out of 50—while sabotaging the fight for the main demand, a “fix” to the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA).

The American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV), the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), and the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association (WVSSPA)—and their pseudo-left apologists—BadAss Teachers, *Jacobin* magazine, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the International Socialist Organization (ISO)—then pronounced this sellout a “victory.” This has proven to be a self-serving lie.

Instead of fighting for a “fix” to PEIA, the union officials, AFT-WV President Christine Campbell, WVEA President Dale Lee and WVSSPA executive director Joe White, took seats on the umpteenth PEIA task force, a rubber-stamp for West Virginia big business, claiming they would fight for teachers and school workers. This too was a betrayal and a fraud.

The escalating walkout of educators, which began February 22, defied state anti-strike laws and repeated back-to-work orders by the union executives. But from the moment the strike in West Virginia erupted, in the form of insurrectionary walkouts in the southern coal counties, until its forced termination, the unions conspired with state officials to shut down the struggle. Their main aims were forcing through a deal acceptable to the coal, oil and natural gas barons who dominate the state and forestalling a nationwide movement of educators to reverse years of budget cuts.

As a kindergarten aide told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) prior to the walkout, “How wonderful it would be to go to bed at night and not worry about paying a doctor’s bill. I am hoping that us coming out on strike will help.”

However, the strike was summarily ended by the bureaucracy March 6 at the point that public support was snowballing, other states were poised to strike and communication workers were walking out. The stab-in-the-back was accomplished under the direct supervision of American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, National Education Association President Lily Garcia and an army of union functionaries who descended on Charleston to smother the strike.

Teachers were told to “Remember in November,” in other words turn out the vote for the Democrats—a party which dominated that state for most of its history and bears joint, if not primary, responsibility for the decades of big business tax cuts. The teachers’ unions were especially eager to demonstrate to the Supreme Court their utility in suppressing the working class in advance of the ruling on *AFSCME v. Janus* in the hopes of maintaining their right to lucrative “agency fees.”

The union executives then joined state legislators and representatives of billion-dollar health corporations (QBE Insurance Group, Centurion Insurance Services, Aetna Insurance) on the task force where, it is widely suspected, the privatization of PEIA is being discussed behind the backs of workers. BrickStreet Mutual Insurance, which also has a representative on the task force and handles the state’s workers’ compensation, is reportedly positioning itself as a potential privatizer.

Attempting to provide a veneer of “listening to the people,” the task force has now held 22 town halls around the state. Billionaire Governor Jim Justice, who could write a personal check to cover PEIA for the next three decades, hypocritically claimed the group would “dig in and look for permanent solutions for a PEIA fix.”

The same phony pledge has been made by governors, Democratic and Republican alike, for the last three decades. Retired educator Carolyn Steinla told the WSWS, “Nothing has changed. As far as I am concerned, it’s a corrupt system and it needs to get fixed. It’s terrible. People need to take a stand and if the associations [the unions] aren’t going to do it, they’ve got to get organized themselves. You can’t just back down like that, you have to fight.”

Hundreds, if not thousands, of angry teachers, retirees and public sector workers attended the hearings to oppose the drive for privatization and demand the restoration of benefits. Many speakers openly wept or otherwise struggled with their emotions as they described the need to battle over months and years with the PEIA board to get life-saving medical care for their families.

Speakers also denounced the role of both the Democrats and Republicans and pointed to the fact that the state legislature does nothing except at the bidding of the extractive industries and big financial interests.

Addressing the Charleston meeting on June 11, educator Jay O’Neal pointed out, “Nothing has changed. Finally, in February, people walked out of their workplaces to demand. Everyone knows this boils down to money. The business franchise tax was

eliminated. This was a failed experiment.”

He cited the blatant transfer of resources to big business through tax breaks. “By returning the corporate net income tax back to 9 percent, we would net \$55 million during next year. Many people here have mentioned increasing the natural gas severance tax up from 5 to 7.5 percent, and that would bring in \$76 million next year. That would be a total \$131 million next year, leaving PEIA with a surplus. I’ve done the math.”

“For a long time, under both Democrats and Republicans, our state has prioritized large corporations instead of regular working citizens,” he concluded.

Jacob, a Riverside High School teacher, said, “I have a wife with a chronic illness and my oldest daughter has a physical disability. I also qualify for food stamps and WIC [the Women, Infants and Children food program] and I have a college degree. We have service personnel like bus drivers making \$11.50 an hour.

“I’m keenly aware this was a joint effort—Republicans are part of the reason we’re here and it’s been Democrats for 30 years.” Jacob recounted how the coal barons notoriously sat in the balcony of the state legislature. Whenever a bill came up for vote, representatives would “literally look up to the gallery and see this [thumbs up or thumbs down] from the representatives of the coal companies” to determine how to vote, he said.

“We’ve had legislators telling us we were lazy, despite working multiple jobs. I’ve had threats on my life and job during this strike. I had to move my family away for safety. I expected this. But going on in this fight for health care is worth it.”

“I stand strong with Fayette County,” said Betsy Atwater. “I am here tonight to say this [crisis] is not my responsibility. I have taught in this state for 42 years, I have given my blood, my sweat, and my tears to teach the disabled students in this state and I deserve a great health care plan. I should not have to beg...

“The bottom line is none of us are fools anymore ... I didn’t spend my money to go to school and have the most advanced degree to beg. Find the money; it’s there for everything else that needs to be bought including \$32,000 couches [referring to Chief Justice Allen Loughry’s \$3.7 million for renovation of court offices and an alleged \$32,000 couch]. Find the money and give us the plan.”

Lisa, a teacher in Kanawha County, explained that her 21-year-old daughter had a stroke. When her local neurologist could not find the reason, she was referred to Cleveland Clinic. “I was told right away [by PEIA] that it was denied. “I was on the phone crying, begging,” she told the crowd.

“If you have never begged for health care for your child you do not know what that means. Finally, I got approval to have her evaluated. They found her problem right away and said they could fix it. Long story short. They did approve it finally; it was a fight. It was a heart defect. I shudder to think what might have happened if I hadn’t been the kind of person I am and hadn’t fought. If my doctor said she needs this treatment, that’s what needs to happen. They’re the medical professionals, not the people sitting in the office at PEIA.”

Vera Miller, a Cabell County teacher, said, “We have been paying a lot of taxes in this state for a long time. Teachers pay taxes too—it might be mind-blowing to those of you on the

platform. We working people get low salaries, and it’s about time other people should start paying too. We want you to bump up the severance tax [on oil and gas extraction]. Secondly, the corporate net tax breaks have been proven not to work—take it back to 9.5 percent. That’s a lot of money to work with.

“We are in a rich state. We need to tax that rich shale. That’s ours, that’s ours! I’m from Raleigh County, but I’ve got family living up in the hollow that goes back to the Civil War, that’s how long we’ve been here. We need to tax this gas and have consideration for the retirees.”

April Easta, an English teacher in Boone County, passed out pictures of her four children to the PEIA board members. She said, “I wrote all their health issues by their pictures. I have sat in the drive-thru to get a prescription for my daughter and I couldn’t afford it. That daughter has asthma—I apologize for crying—it was \$86. Do you know what that’s like? To have a college degree, to be a teacher for almost 20 years and not be able to get a prescription for a child who needs it?”

“It’s heartbreaking, it’s embarrassing. I want you to remember their faces, because you are hurting them. They deserve the health care they need,” she implored.

Brianne noted that the majority of PEIA participants, by the agency’s own records, earn between \$20,000 and \$30,000. “How is that okay—that the majority of our participants weave in and out of the federal poverty line?” She threatened, “We’re talking Labor Stoppage 2.0. If you don’t think so, we’re talking about it... We’re smart people, we can find the money and we know you can too. Are you willing to do it? Are you willing to serve the people or Big Pharma and big corporations?”

To prepare the next round of struggle this fall, workers must draw the lessons of the spring struggles and take the leadership out of the hands of the pro-capitalist unions. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of independent rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees to fuse together the fight of all sections of the working class into a unified political movement in defense of public education, the right to universal high-quality health care and all social rights. The resurgence of the class struggle must be accompanied with a conscious political movement against the entire state apparatus, the Democratic and Republican Parties, and the capitalist profit system.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>