

DSA covers for unions and Democrats in new book on walkout by West Virginia teachers

55 Strong, Inside the West Virginia Teachers' Strike

By Nancy Hanover
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The first responsibility of a genuine socialist movement is to tell the truth to the working class. The recently published small volume *55 Strong, Inside the West Virginia Teachers' Strike*, widely promoted by Labor Notes and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), does precisely the opposite.

55 Strong is a whitewash of the unions, the Democratic Party and the middle-class fake socialist groups, which worked together to derail and betray the nine-day strike of West Virginia educators last spring. The DSA, which is a faction of the Democratic Party, has rushed the book to press in order to promote the election of various Democrats, including West Virginia US Senatorial candidate Richard Ojeda, in the November elections. The DSA, ISO and Labor Notes group, whose members have increasingly taken leading positions in the teacher unions, want to shore up the discredited American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) as new struggles by teachers emerge in Los Angeles and other areas.

Edited by “activist” Jessica Salfia, West Virginia-based folklorist Emily Hilliard and Appalachia-focused author Elizabeth Catte, the book claims to feature “authentic teacher stories.” The volume strings together a series of interviews and personal essays by lower level union officials, supporters of Labor Notes, the DSA or *Jacobin* magazine and a few others. It pushes the myth of a “historic victory” by West Virginia educators, ascribes to the unions a heroic role and claims the Democrats were championing the cause of teachers against the Republican-controlled legislature.

Teachers and workers throughout the US were indeed galvanized by West Virginia teachers' defiance of the state anti-strike laws and their rejection of the repeated back-to-work orders from their unions. Last spring's teachers' strikes were among the first manifestations of a resurgence of the class struggle after decades in which the unions suppressed resistance to the growth of social inequality and capitalist exploitation in the US and internationally.

The strike was not launched by the unions but through a rebellion of rank-and-file teachers using social media to organize teachers and school employees independently of the AFT, NEA and its local affiliates. Tragically, however, educators did not have independent organizations to sustain the struggle by reaching out to teachers across the US and broader sections of the working class.

Instead, a section of lower-level union officials associated with Labor Notes and other pro-union “activists” helped the unions reassert control and strangle the strike. They boosted the trade union apparatus, repeatedly demanded that teachers adhere to the unions' rotten deals (each one labeled a “victory”), blacklisted the *World Socialist Web Site* and did everything in their power to constrain teachers' efforts within the confines of the two-party capitalist system.

The main demands of the strike—a “fix” to the under-funded Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA), adequate wages and full funding of public education—were not met. Instead the school workers' union officials took seats on yet another PEIA “task force” to listen to another round of do-nothing hearings. The paltry pay raise of 5 percent in West Virginia, where teachers' salaries ranked 48th in the US, at best, barely covers the money teachers routinely pay out of pocket for classroom supplies every year due to chronic underfunding of education. This meager pay raise may, moreover, be paid for by cutting other vital services.

These facts, of life-and-death concern to every teacher and public service worker in the state, are blithely omitted from *55 Strong*. Where was the victory? PEIA is still underfunded and being threatened with privatization by Governor Jim Justice. The unions, meanwhile, have urged teachers to sign a petition addressed to the legislature, acknowledging that nothing is “fixed.”

The book's approach is thoroughly parochial and often condescending. Among the interviews selected for publication are those which characterize the attacks on public education as state-specific, the result of a “lack of respect” or a product of gender-bias. In other words, the editors, in line with the identity politics pushed by the Democratic Party, emphasize regional or gender differences to reinforce divisions in the working class. This reactionary perspective is pushed by the pseudo-left precisely as teachers and workers around the world, regardless of race, gender or nationality, find themselves in exactly the same struggle and desperately require a means to unify.

Working from the standpoint of the world political situation, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), by contrast, anticipated this outbreak of mass struggles, fought throughout the West Virginia struggle to make workers conscious of the underlying political issues and provided leadership to unite workers in defense of public education. For an honest analysis of these experiences, the reader should turn to the Mehring Books publication, *The 2018 Teacher Rebellion* (available here) as well as the more than 100 articles produced by the *World Socialist Web Site* on teacher struggles during the spring.

The Socialist Equality Party fought to unite the fight in West Virginia to the already developing teacher struggles in Oklahoma, Pittsburgh and Florida as well as internationally. The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* steadfastly warned of the anti-working class character of the unions. As seven West Virginia counties struck on February 17, the *WSWS* predicted that the unions would attempt to “quickly shut down any struggle if Governor Justice and the state legislature show some signs of ‘movement.’”

On March 2, the *WSWS* again urged workers to take up an independent fight and warned, “Far from being ‘workers’ organizations,’ the unions

are critical mechanisms for the suppression of the class struggle. A movement to defend the interests of workers requires the formation of new organizations—rank and file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees, democratically controlled and directed by the workers themselves.”

The rebellion against the back-to-work order by the unions came as a shock to various pseudo-left publications, including *Jacobin*, which heralded the deal reached by the union on February 27 and declared the strike over because the unions said so. But it was breath of fresh air for workers in the US and around the world. With the shackles of the unions at least temporarily loosened, teachers, other workers and young people felt their strength and expressed a desire to discuss the most radical solutions to society’s problems.

Zac Corrigan, representing the SEP’s youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), addressed a rally of more than 1,000 West Virginia students and teachers at the capitol in Charleston and emphasized that the teachers’ fight was a “political struggle to determine which class should rule” and “how the wealth created by the working class should be distributed.”

While the SEP won support from workers by telling the truth and raising the critical political lessons necessary to unify and broaden the struggle, the DSA, ISO and other pseudo-left organizations rushed to the defense of the unions and Democrats. To this end, *55 Strong* deliberately omits, misrepresents or fabricates factual events.

Among the DSA members included in the book is United Caucuses of Rank and File Educators founder Jay O’Neal. He begins his essay with the admission that he anticipated nothing prior to February. He recounts his original conception that “organizing a strike would surely be a years-long process.” This does not prevent him from shameless self-promotion about launching a Facebook group to address the “biggest barrier to change,” the “legislature playing our unions against one another.”

When the southern coal county teachers launched the strike and it initially broke free of union control, O’Neal and his co-thinkers—far from advocating for a politically independent, much less socialist, program to unite the working class—doubled down at the state capitol “trying to work with state legislators.”

O’Neal falsely credits the state unions for calling the statewide two-day walkout. This is a lie. The southern districts wildcatted—without union sanction. They spread the strike to 55 districts—in the face of union opposition. The unions’ sanction of the walkout only followed mass demonstrations of between 5,000–10,000 workers—both union and non-union educators—at the state capitol, which threatened to render the unions irrelevant. The belated sanction was a crisis maneuver, an attempt by the unions to rein-in the growing action spreading throughout the state. The unions followed the short official strike by once again ordering teachers back to work and demanding a “cooling off day” to which teachers responded, “Cooling off is heating us up” and continued the strike.

Instead of heeding the union, teachers held impromptu meetings inside and outside the capitol and voted to stay out. In the face of teachers’ intransigence, AFT President Randi Weingarten and National Education Association President Lily Eskelsen Garcia flew into Charleston with an army of union functionaries to reassert the unions’ control over the strike, wrap it up and force through a sellout deal proposed by billionaire coal baron Governor Justice.

These events, which proved that the “biggest barrier to change” was the unions themselves, do not make it into the pages of *55 Strong*. Instead, O’Neal extols the results of the strike, implying that this was vindication of the AFT and NEA. He proudly claims, “That walkout result[ed] in a 5 percent raise for all employees, a ‘freeze’ on changes to PEIA, a task force appointed to fix PEIA, and the elimination of bills that would have

further hurt education United, public employees had forced their legislature to listen.”

In another essay, Katie Endicott, billed as a “union activist,” glorifies the phony promises of the WVEA to “fully support” teachers. Tega McGuffin Toney, president of Fayette County AFT (not identified as such), claims “local union leaders truly were the glue that held many of the teachers together.”

In fact, the NEA and AFT and their “left” apologists did everything to isolate the strike and wear teachers down by promoting impotent appeals to the state legislature. This was under conditions in which the potential existed to build a powerful united movement of the working class. As West Virginia teachers wildcatted, teachers in Phoenix carried out sickouts over salaries. Thousands of lecturers defied their unions and walked out in the United Kingdom. And Frontier Communication workers in West Virginia struck, solidarizing themselves entirely with the teachers. Walkouts would follow in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Colorado, North Carolina, Arizona and most recently in Washington state.

The unions kept workers divided and opposed the call for a national or general strike. They sought to corral teachers behind the Democrats with slogans like “Remember in November,” urging them to run as Democrats in local elections and through ballot proposals to mildly increase taxes on the wealthy, such as Arizona’s “Invest in Ed,” which was struck down by the courts.

The book endlessly promotes the Democrats. “Sometimes we felt like we didn’t have a spokesperson, and then Ojeda came along,” enthused *55 Strong* essayist Toney, speaking recently to CNN. “And I think what’s so captivating about Ojeda is that he’s authentic and he’s real and he’s one of us.” Ojeda, an extreme right-wing militarist who backed Trump, is among a large group of Democratic candidates with ties to the military and CIA.

“Critically, Democrats in our state legislature sided with public employees during our fight for a raise and healthcare funding this year,” Comer writes. “We exerted pressure and they responded quickly.” Announcing a DSA-supported group “WV United,” O’Neal said in *Labor Notes*, “Right now all the unions are saying ‘Remember in November.’ We’d love it if we flipped both houses...”

These people think workers have a short memory. But the Democrats have controlled the governor’s seat in West Virginia for 32 of the last 40 years, overseeing the defunding of PEIA and public schools. As part of the massive redistribution of wealth from the working class to the financial elite after the Crash of 2008, Obama spearheaded a war against public education and teachers and expanded charter schools and other for-profit schemes. Democratic state governments in California, New York, Colorado and other states, as well as local Democratic administrations in Los Angeles and other cities have done the same.

The bipartisan war against public education and the impoverishment of the working class *should* be remembered, and not just in November! Only a socialist redistribution of wealth can solve these problems including the guarantee of free, high quality education for all and decent wages for all school workers. That requires a frontal assault on the source of the power of the corporate and financial elite: its control of economic life, and with that, the entire political system. The redistribution of wealth to the working class must be connected to the fight for workers’ power, the transformation of the giant corporations and banks into publicly owned utilities, and the socialist reorganization of economic life.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>