

# United States: West Virginia Teachers' Strike Showed the Way Forward

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**The teachers were at the end of their rope, decided they had nothing to lose and had to take action. They defied West Virginia, and their own union, too.**

An old Wobbly song by Joe Hill goes: *"There is power, there is power, when a band of working [people] stand, hand in hand!"*

The victorious strike by teachers in West Virginia, which was organized bottom up by rank and file teachers, 75 percent women, has demonstrated the truth of what Joe Hill's wrote.

As a headline in the *New York Times* said, "Striking Teachers Defied West Virginia, and Their Own Union, Too".

The strike occurred against the background of a very weak labor movement nationally, saddled with a conservative and class collaborationist bureaucracy mainly interested in lining its own pockets. As such, the West Virginia teachers have given an important lesson for all working people on the way forward.

The teachers faced big obstacles. In West Virginia all public workers cannot legally strike, and they can be fired if they do. They are barred by law from collective bargaining. There are state affiliates of the two national teachers' unions, the National Educational Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Membership in these unions in the state is voluntary, and since they are barred from collective bargaining, all they can do is take up teachers' grievances.

The teachers knew the risks of striking, but as one teacher said, "If they fire me I'll get a job at Target with better pay." The teachers were at the end of their rope, and decided they had nothing to lose and had to take action.

West Virginia ranks near the bottom in teachers' pay - 47<sup>th</sup> out of the 50 states. Many are forced to take on second jobs to make ends meet. That was one issue. Another was plans by the state's Republican leaders to pass on health care costs to the workers.

New leaders emerged as the struggle developed. One of these, Katie Endicott was interviewed in *Socialist Worker*. She and her husband are teachers in Mingo county. Her husband attended a small rally in the state capital, Charleston, on January 15, where he learned about the proposed attack on teachers' health insurance and other bills attacking public education.

Katie told him he should tell people what he learned, "because people in my school didn't know." He made a Facebook video that went viral. She began to get many calls from outraged fellow teachers in Mingo county. They called a meeting and hundreds showed up.

She said that was "basically all of our bus drivers, office workers, teachers and cooks" in the county.

The teachers reached out to all school employees. They discussed what they could do, and came to the conclusion unanimously to begin with a one-day sick out strike, for February 2.

In addition to mobilizing all school employees, the teachers later broadened their goals to include all public workers in the state.

"If we had the courage to step out, I knew other counties would follow us – that we wouldn't be alone," Endicott said. That turned out to be true, and teachers and the other school workers in other counties began to hold their own meetings "and our people were invited to go to those meetings and speak."

Without going into all the details, soon the teachers in many counties were being mobilized, and then all 55 counties were on board for a strike, having taken votes in mass meetings. Under this pressure, the leaders of the teachers' unions called a state-wide mass meeting, which set February 22 and 23 for work stoppages across the state.

But the rank and file wanted more. Katie said, "In our school, our county and neighboring counties, based on what my friends told me ... everybody was saying that if we go out, if we're going out those two days, we're not coming back until it is finished." So the strike continued, with rallies, demonstrations and mass decision-making meetings.

The teachers and other public workers staged an occupation of the state capitol building of some 5,000. There was wide support in the public at large.

Under this growing pressure, on February 28, the governor told the union representatives that he was for a five percent pay raise. The union leaders told the teachers to go back to work. The rank and file reaction was anger. They said that "promises and handshakes in the Capital were not good enough," reported the New York Times.

"No matter what union leaders said, they were staying out until they had what they wanted, and in writing."

At that point the rank and file took charge, and the union leaders followed.

The Republican-controlled state legislature had to approve any pay raise, and spent some days arguing about it. Finally, reluctantly, and facing the threat of the continuing strike, they agreed to it, and then the rank and file called off the strike.

The five percent pay raise was not only for teachers, but for all public employees. The teachers had become the vanguard for all public workers in the state.

This was a big victory. But the raise still leaves teachers in West Virginia among the worst paid in the country. The governor promised that he would convene some kind of task force to address the health care issue, and the skeptical teachers will be monitoring that.

One lesson of this struggle for all workers is that they don't have to follow decisions by union leaders they don't like, if they have mobilized the power of the rank and file.

What U.S. workers face concerning the bureaucracy was illustrated by the position taken by the national of AFT just after the strike ended concerning a case before the Supreme Court. Previously, courts have ruled that public sector unions could insist that workers who refused to join the union would still have to pay an "agency fee" for costs the union incurred representing them. The new case seeks to overturn that.

Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT warned the Supreme Court that overturning the agency fees would “lead to more activism and political action” like what happened in West Virginia. “Collective bargaining exists as a way for workers and employers to peacefully solve labor relations,” said Weingarten, whose annual salary is \$500,000. She warned that “the activism [seen in West Virginia] will be multiplied and magnified across the country if collective bargaining is struck down.”

Leaving aside the conflation of agency fees and collective bargaining, unions are crucial in limiting the growth of militant class struggle, in her opinion. She was elaborating on statements made by a union lawyer to the Supreme Court: “Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes.”

A former AFT organizer wrote: “The combination of exclusive union representation, mandatory agency fees, no-strike clauses and ‘management rights’ are the foundation of our peculiar labor relations system,” and said the overturning of agency fees would lead workers to “engage in wildcat strikes,” and look to “more left-wing and militant” organizations.

Another lesson was the importance of workers’ democracy in mobilizing workers’ power. Championing other workers was another.

The U.S. labor movement needs to be rebuilt on a class struggle basis. That cannot be done from the corrupt union tops. It will only come from the bottom up through the kinds of things the West Virginia teachers did, organizing the rank and file through democratic discussion and decision making, placing reliance on the workers themselves.

This rebuilding will take time. There will be fits and starts, victories and defeats in the course of many struggles. The anti-worker offensive by the ruling capitalist class and its two parties that has been developing for some decades will impel new battles as more workers begin to realize that their backs are against the wall. In these struggles, new leaders will be thrown up, as in West Virginia, and either the old unions will be transformed or new unions will be built.

Both happened in the great labor upsurge in the 1930s.

**Barry Sheppard**

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