

“Stand up for what you believe in and for what you deserve”

Workers, students speak out in support of West Virginia teachers

Our reporters
28 February 2018

On Tuesday, the teachers’ unions in West Virginia announced that they had reached an agreement with the state’s billionaire governor to end the strike by more than 20,000 teachers and school workers. The agreement includes an inadequate pay increase that may never be enacted and does nothing to address soaring health care costs.

The decision comes as the strike is winning growing support from workers throughout the country, encouraged by the determined stand that teachers have taken in defense of their own interests and the interests of the entire working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to auto workers, students and other workers about the strike. On Tuesday, the WSWWS published a call for the mobilization of the entire working class behind the West Virginia teachers.

Jalynn, 25, is a full-time worker at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant (SHAP) outside Detroit. “I grew up in DPS [Detroit Public Schools]. DPS has been facing trials and tribulations for a long time. There has always been the issue of teachers’ compensation, shortage of materials—it even got to the point where they were asking parents to provide more materials, and so people started asking, ‘Where’s all the school funding going? Why don’t the kids have what they need?’

“When I was in school there was a small strike [in 2006], where the teachers all got together over their compensation. But eventually they got the teachers back in the classroom, and we still have all these problems today.

“I have two daughters who are in preschool now in DPS. I still don’t get why so many schools closed and what the reasons were for that. But after I graduated, schools began closing, and they started having to send kids all over the place, and the transition was difficult for a lot of those kids.

“I would definitely tell the teachers in West Virginia to stand up for what you believe in and for what you deserve. I totally agree with them and support them. If you’re being criticized or ridiculed for being ‘selfish,’ that’s just wrong. Teaching is a career and it’s very important, and those teachers should be better taken care of. It’s definitely a problem if you can’t even afford your own health care, but you’re also being placed with the responsibility of educating the kids in our communities.”

Brandon, a temporary part-time worker at SHAP said to the teachers in West Virginia: “It’s crazy to me that you went to school for how long, and paid for a degree to be a teacher, and this is what you’re making in the long run? It’s like it’s not worth it. How is that even fair?”

“I support the teachers. I agree, and I get it and I feel what they’re going through. They [the union] keep telling you to just suffer through it, but I say that you should continue to do what you’re doing [striking]. I wish I had workers with me doing what you’re doing. Me by myself, or us by ourselves, we can’t take that stand alone—but if I had others with me I would do it too. I salute the ones who are doing this for all of us.”

Debra Miller is a former autoworker and was a leader among tenants at the Griswold building in Downtown Detroit. The Griswold building was home to retired and disabled workers on fixed incomes whose rent was subsidized by the government under Section 8 of the Housing Act of 1937. They were forced out of the building in 2013, which was then renovated as part of the gentrification of downtown Detroit.

Debra told the WSWWS, “I applaud the West Virginia teachers and support the struggle they are waging. Finally working people are taking a stand! As a former member of the UAW, I watched as the unions declined in the 70’s and 80’s, giving up the hard won gains of previous generations, then by the 90’s actually becoming part of the corporations working directly with management.

“We need new fighting organizations to represent us, not only to defend our social right to a good paying job, education and health care, but also to speak for us politically. [West Virginia] Governor Jim Justice shows that there is not a bit of difference between Democrats and Republicans, and working people need to take power for themselves. This is something that needs to be done all over the world.

“Working people have social rights, and we cannot let the rich destroy our spirit and our souls. The issue is not protesting to the existing system but that of changing it as a whole. I know that this is challenging and we get nervous, but we have power in numbers and we need new leaders. I would encourage the teachers to read all the material on the WSWWS and to learn

more about socialism. This is our time!”

Frank, an autoworker at the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant, spoke out in solidarity with the striking teachers: “Stand strong union brothers and sisters! You all deserve a better raise and more affordable health care! Teachers are already notoriously underpaid. A four percent raise over three years is basically a slap in the face. It doesn’t even cover inflation. Four percent each year would be more like it.” He added, “I’d love for the country and its workers to stand up to big business and demand changes. We all deserve a living wage.”

Another auto worker in Chicago said, “It is of vital importance that we shed as much light on this strike as possible. The reason is because it is a true strike of the teachers, the workers themselves, and not orchestrated or guided by the union.

“I truly hope that this strike creates a movement amongst the working class in the nation, and we begin to demand what we so rightfully deserve. I hope they remain strong. What they are demanding is not outlandish; they are very fair and humane demands. I hope they don’t give in, because what they are fighting for is right, and that should not be negotiable.”

The WSWS also spoke to several students. Jen, from Kalamazoo, said, “The teachers have my and many other students’ full support. Our educators are in some of the most important positions for our society’s prosperity. Youth are the future, and those helping to educate them are given laughable pay. Teachers are under so much stress mentally and emotionally, and pile onto that financially—this is despicable!

“I was talking with my Great Grandma Dorsy about the strikes, and she said, ‘Nothing ever got accomplished by sitting down and taking the blows. I’m thrilled, just thrilled, that there are people in this profession preserving its integrity. I’m long retired [she is 95], but I can remember so much from my time teaching. Teachers are so, so, so important.’”

Jen added, “Spanning generations, we know that this is a huge issue! The teachers are courageous and have a clear goal in mind. They are unwavering, and I admire this. This won’t be an easy fight, but they aren’t fighting this alone. The working class is larger than the two-party system, larger than the trade unions, larger than this adversity and intimidation. We are one with you, West Virginia teachers, and that won’t change.”

Sam, a student at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, said, “As a current student in, and beneficiary of, public education, I see the incredible value public school teachers bring to society.

“So many have benefited from the work of educators. Our entire society is built on the foundation of the knowledge and skills teachers equip students and youth with through public education. The capitalist class has benefited immensely from the value they extract from workers educated by public school teachers. These teachers have every right to demand better pay.

“Any progressive advancement in society’s education requires the elevation of the compensation and living standards

of teachers. However, for any real change to be made, teachers must make these demands independent of the two big business parties and the hypocritical union bureaucracy.”

A third-grade teacher in Pittsburgh said, “I support the teachers in West Virginia. Teachers have been under attack everywhere, and it is time that we all stand up together. Classes are too big, and they are putting all the money into Charter schools. We should be supporting education for everyone.

“It’s not right that teachers in West Virginia should be having to take a pay cut to pay for their health care. We work all day and often into the evening preparing for the next day. There are many social problems that come into school. Because of poverty, children are hungry, need warm clothes and we have to deal with this.

“In 40 years, I’ve seen many strikes,” said Gary, a teacher of animation and a filmmaker. “After every one, the deal struck was always worse than what they started with. It’s capitalism. They hate public employees, public education is down to drips and drabs. The unions are not for us; they’re for them—all for the administrations. People voted for Obama and what did they get—eight years of nothing.”

Tashi, a personal trainer from Berkeley, CA, agreed that teachers were underpaid and overworked. “We need to have a long-term view on this issue,” Tashi explained, “If teachers are overworked and underpaid, there will be less teachers in the long run. We will have less educated students coming up—this is a very deep issue.

“In my mind, food, education, and health, should not be based on profit, but should be based on whether people are healthy or not. It’s important we take care of our teachers and give them all the resources they need to educate our kids, what is more important than that? I absolutely support the teachers going on strike, all the way.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact