

Public school teacher strikes show workplace organizing pays off

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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

While those at the top of the income pyramid continue to celebrate economic trends, the great majority of working people continue to struggle to make ends meet. However, teacher victories in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky and Arizona demonstrate that sustained workplace organizing, labor-community solidarity, and a willingness to strike can change the balance of power in favor of working people and produce meaningful gains.

Teacher Strikes

West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky and Arizona are all considered red states, with legislatures that have aggressively reduced taxes on the wealthy and corporations, slashed spending on social programs, and gutted union rights for public sector workers by denying them the right to collectively bargain or strike. Yet, after months of careful workplace and community organizing, West Virginia teachers launched a nine-day strike in February that shut down the entire state's public school system and won them and all other state workers a 5 percent salary increase and a government promise to convene a task force to find ways to reign in rising worker health care costs.

Oklahoma teachers followed with their own workplace and community actions and a nine-day statewide strike in early April. The day before the start of the strike, the legislature hurriedly approved salary increases of \$6,000 for teachers and \$1,250 for support staff, and days later a modest \$40 million increase in the education budget. This wasn't enough to convince the teachers to call off their strike; they had demanded a raise of \$10,000 for teachers and \$5,000 for support staff, \$200 million for increased school funding, \$213 million for state employee raises and a \$255.9 million increase in health care funding. However, after the head of Oklahoma Education Association called for an end to the walkout, saying that it had achieved all it could, teachers, many reluctantly, agreed to return to work without further gains.

Kentucky teachers staged widespread "sick-outs" and demonstrations at the state capital in April to protest cuts to teacher pensions and a lack of school funding. Although they failed to reverse the pension cut, they did succeed in pushing the state legislature to pass a new budget that included a significant increase in new spending for public education financed by a \$480 million tax increase.

Arizona teachers started organizing in late March through a rank and file organized Facebook group with the support of the Arizona Education Association. In April, they launched a series of workplace actions, walkouts and demonstrations to press their demands for salary increases for themselves and other education workers and a



Teachers rally outside the state Capitol on the second day of a teacher walkout to demand higher pay and more funding for education in Oklahoma City, Okla., April 3, 2018.

REUTERS/NICK OXFORD



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significant boost to the education budget. The governor, hoping to avoid a threatened strike, promised to give teachers a 20 percent raise by 2020, including a 9 percent raise this year, and without raising taxes. The teachers weren't satisfied. They didn't believe that the governor would follow through on his promise. They wanted raises for all school workers, and they wanted school funding returned to its 2008 level. In late April, after a statewide vote, teachers and other school personal began a "walkout" despite the fact that under Arizona law, "striking" teachers could be fired or lose their teaching credential.

The walkout lasted six days and only ended after the governor signed into law a plan that gave teachers their raise and a provided a modest increase in school spending. The head of the Arizona Education Association has since called for a campaign for a November ballot measure that would institute an income tax increase

on the wealthiest taxpayers to raise new funds for education.

While the gains won to this point are not sufficient to reverse decades of concerted action by state legislatures to undermine public services and public workers, they are impressive nonetheless and should encourage a renewed focus on and support for workplace organizing and collective action.

Organizing To Win

These victories did not come easily. Teachers were willing to take the bold step of engaging in technically illegal strikes for two main reasons. The first is that they have endured terrible teaching conditions for years. For example, per-student instructional funding in Oklahoma had fallen 30 percent below its 2008 level. Some 20 percent of the state's school districts were financially forced to run four-day school weeks. Textbooks are in short supply and out of date and classes seriously overcrowded. And teachers and staff had not received a raise in 10 years; pay was so low that many worked multiple jobs. The situation in Arizona is similar. Adding insult to injury is the fact that state legislatures in all these states had slashed spending on education in order to finance massive tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy.

The second reason is that strike actions were preceded by months of organizing that informed and created bonds of solidarity. West Virginia was a model. Forums were held in most schools which educated and also encouraged local leadership development, teachers joined by other school workers engaged in ever more

militant school-based actions, and strike votes were held in every school with the participation of all teachers and staff. Teacher activists, most of whom were rank and file union activists, used a variety of methods, including social media, to build a strong state-wide network to coordinate their work. And the statewide strike was called only when it was clear that it had the support of the overwhelming majority of teachers, support staff and school bus drivers.

This strong rank and file base was key to the strike's success. After five days, the governor and teacher union leaders announced that a compromise deal had been reached and called for an end to the strike. However, the rank and file refused. They held their strike until the state legislature actually approved an agreement that fully met their demands.

The Oklahoma strike was less successful in part because a weaker union movement meant fewer trained and networked labor activists. As a consequence, the strike was launched without the same level of statewide workplace organization and support. And as a result, it made it much harder for rank and file teacher activists to effectively oppose the union leadership's call to settle for what was won and to return to work. To be fair, it is likely that Oklahoma law, which requires that 75 percent of the legislature vote in favor of any revenue hike, also contributed to teacher willingness to end their strike.

Arizona teachers, much like in West Virginia, also engaged in slow and careful base building, statewide networking, and effective community outreach. One indicator of community support for the teacher walkout: Numerous parent groups organized to cooperatively share child care duties for working parents. And the teacher uprising continues to spread - Colorado and North Carolina teachers have recently engaged in one day walkouts and demonstrations at their respective state capitols to protest low wages and inadequate education budgets.

Reasons to Celebrate

These teacher strikes are important. They have raised the salaries of teachers and other education workers, thereby helping schools attract and retain talented people. They have also increased state education budgets and educational opportunities for students. They also shine a spotlight on the destructive consequences of past tax giveaways to the rich and powerful and the need for new progressive sources of tax revenue. Finally, they show that workers can effect change, improving their own living and working conditions, even under extremely hostile conditions, through sustained workplace organization, a commitment to bargaining for the common good and audacity.