



West Virginia Teachers: Raising the Class Struggle Stakes

Marcus Otono Thu, 08/03/2018 - 11:46

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Truth be told, it caught most of us by surprise. Even those of us who have been predicting and expecting an uptick in class struggle from organized labor were surprised by the strength of the strike movement by West Virginia teachers. They went all in and then they all went out. And then stayed out when a supposed "deal" had been reached.

The details of the grievances can be found in many places and in many articles about this strike and, of course, details matter, especially to the strikers themselves. Suffice to say, the details are over the economic issues of pay and benefits, primarily issues of healthcare costs in the system that covers state employees.

But in a larger sense, this is not as much about the details of one particular economic struggle as it is about the state of the labor movement in the United States in general. This strike shows that the working class in the US is ready to fight. After forty years of neo-liberal austerity and trickle down economics that has not worked as promised, but instead has devastated the working class nationwide and funneled wealth into fewer and fewer hands, West Virginia teachers have said in no uncertain terms that enough is enough.

It didn't matter that the strike was adjudged "illegal" by the state's Attorney General and it didn't matter that the union bureaucracy and the governor of the state reached an agreement to end the strike two days after it began. The teachers from the bottom up decided that they were the ones who would decide when the strike was over and when their demands had been met. And that's a welcome development for a US working class that has seen decades of class war perpetrated against them and taken it all without any significant fightback.

The Strike: A Rarely Used Weapon

Just the idea of a strike has been out of favor for decades in the US labor movement. The union bureaucrats swallowed the line that a strike was bad for workers and that any sort of labor militancy was worse. Instead, organized labor in the US bought fully and completely into the idea that unions were going to be a "partner" with the owners and were going to be concerned with the profit and well-being of the company as much as they were with the well-being of their workers. This led to the co-opting of the unions into an unholy alliance with the very people that didn't even acknowledge their reasons for existing, much less any power in the workplace. It resulted in concession after concession in contracts that put more and more of the burden for health care costs, pension costs and other costs of employment onto the backs of the workers themselves, led to stagnating, if not falling, wages and, as a result, let the company pile up more and more profit at the workers' expense.

It also led to the decline of the union movement as a whole. The popularity of unions declined as they pursued this collaborationist strategy and forgot their entire history and reason for being. Many potential members decided that they didn't need a union if the union wasn't going to stand up for them and their families. And who could blame them?

A Political Struggle

Of course, in West Virginia this is not a direct conflict between workers and some "greedy" owner in the private sector over what their share of the products of their labor should be. The teachers of West Virginia are state employees and, as

such, can't negotiate their wages and benefits directly with anyone, but representatives of the state. And then any deal reached has to be approved by a right-wing legislature that is ideologically opposed to the idea of taxation in general, much less taxation of the ones that actually have the wealth in the state, namely the corporations and the rich.

This is shown by the 'deals' they have offered to the teachers to get them to go back to work. The latest 'deal' involves a 5% immediate wage raise, a freeze in healthcare premiums and deductibles for 16 months, and a 'promise' to fix the problems with the healthcare system that covers state employees. But the right wing legislature has hinted that this will be paid for by \$82 million in cuts shifting money from other departments like Medicaid and other services for the poor and working class and not by raising any taxes on the ones who can most afford to pay.

It's a game of Three Card Monte designed to break the will of the strikers and their supporters in the working class and poor, by taking money from one needy and underfunded sector and giving it to another needy and underfunded sector. A classic capitalist tactic designed to pit members of the working class against each other, rather than their true class enemies. When these cuts to the wider working class and poor begin to hurt, you can bet that it will be the 'greedy teachers' who will be blamed and not the politicians or their capitalist owners.

Unfortunately, this gambit will probably work to end the strike and we can be sure that the union bureaucrats will go along with it, since they've already put their stamp of approval on it. This shows the burning need for union reform, for grassroots control that can stop this kind of thing happening.

What everyone involved must realize is that this struggle is not purely economic. This is also a political struggle that places workers and their rights against a right-wing ideology that has proven over and over again that it fails workers and the people every time it's tried. A 'raise' taken from the pockets of other workers even poorer than you are and a 'promise' to fix something that they've had years to fix is not a solution to even the economic reasons for this strike. There is a very good likelihood that next year, after the 16 month freeze on health insurance premiums and deductibles, the situation will be exactly the same as it is today, with the raise soaked up by inflation and rising healthcare costs and the promised 'fix' for the state healthcare system tied up in ideological red tape and governmental bureaucratic delaying tactics. They will do anything to avoid a tax hike on the ones who can most afford it.

Keeping politics out of the unions is suicidal. The bosses don't do this for a minute. They use their political control over state legislatures, governorships, the courts, to impose anti-union 'right to work' (right to scab) laws, like Wisconsin's 2011 Act 10, which virtually abolished collective bargaining rights for the state's public employees. This has since been copied in Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin and West Virginia itself, with Missouri threatening to follow suit. To combat this means political action by labor - elected representatives who will defend us and fight the bosses - politicians. But it will also take direct action- political strikes to break the shackles on the unions.

Grassroots Action

This strike and its success to this point owes it all to the will of the vast majority of the teachers of the state of West Virginia. This strike and this 'win' no matter how limited, is all thanks to the efforts of the teachers themselves and no one else. The legislature, the governor's office, and the union bureaucrats had nothing to do with either calling or continuing this strike. From its inception as a secret Facebook page to the resounding 'NO!' to the governor and the union bureaucrats when an inadequate settlement offer was first extended, the teachers themselves have been the ones calling the shots. In the space of a few short months, it went from a few people on-line to a mass movement of tens of thousands on the picket lines and in the halls of the legislature. Every school district in the state went out on strike.

They also stayed together when the first 'deal' to end the strike was announced by the governor and the union leadership. At this point, when everybody in the media was touting the end of the strike, the teachers took the initiative and said that this wasn't enough. They stayed together and they stayed out.

No matter the outcome, in many ways this has been a 'win' for the working class in the US. The teachers of West Virginia have shown that workers can win some concessions from the capitalist system and even from the most

reactionary representatives of that system. But notice that nothing got done until the workers themselves decided to take matters into their own collective hands and fight for it.

Lessons Learned And A Step Further

The lessons to be learned from this strike are many and show the promise of spurring other actions in other states from underpaid teachers in those localities. There are already plans for some actions in Oklahoma with the potential for a statewide strike. Arizona and Kentucky teachers are also beginning to make plans for actions of their own. And, once again, all of these actions are coming primarily from the teachers themselves, pushing their unions into action, rather than following the misleadership of the "leaders". This is evidence of a working class awakening to their power in society.

They brought in the community in support of their strike. With the support of the community at large, they were able to bring the local school boards along to sanction the closing of the schools in the various districts. They ignored the threats of the "illegality" of the strike and the vague threats against their actions. But mostly the lesson of solidarity was paramount. They hung together and made some gains.

But, to truly change the political paradigm of austerity, economic stagnation, and the destruction of the well-being of the working class, much more will be needed. Strikes, and solidarity action with them, will need to be extended into all sectors and all areas of the country, even if they start as limited actions. Since no one should expect the ruling elite will back off from its vicious cuts in pensions, welfare, public services and anti-labor laws, there will be the need for a general strike.

But, until conditions are ripe for this most revolutionary of acts by the working class, no one must be left to strike alone. We need supporting action from other sectors and mobilization of whole communities of working people behind them. And if the union bureaucrats won't organize it, then the members need to organize supporters into local strike committees to carry out these supportive actions. The West Virginia teachers have shown the power of workers' self organization and now this power needs to be extended to every worker and every workplace possible, not only throughout West Virginia, but also throughout the country.

A Workers' Party

Every strike over economics has a political element. This is no less true in the private sector, but it is more obvious in the public sector. Strikes call into question who has the power in the workplace and in society at large. West Virginia is a state that Donald Trump won during the last election by a double digit percentage. It is a state where the Republican Party, the most overt supporters of the bosses, have a death grip on political power; a state where the laws are fixed to make legal and effective strikes nigh impossible. And it's a state where the nominal "opposition" in the Democratic Party is almost nonexistent in wielding political power.

The governor, Jim Justice, actually won election as a Democrat with the support of the teachers' union and labor, but then quickly changed party affiliation after his election. Not that surprising, as Justice is a billionaire whose natural affinities would lie with the Republican positions that benefit him personally. This easy switch proves how much the two parties are the same, at least in this mostly white and mostly poor state.

Part of the political problem for workers in West Virginia stems from the fact that the Democrats are no real opposition, but merely Republicans "lite". For the most part they offer workers nothing on the economic front that is much different than the Republicans. Vague platitudes supporting the "middle class" against the "greedy corporations" won't cut it against a blatant power grab by the billionaire class, especially when their practical "solutions" are mostly the same as Republicans and based on the same mindset of corporate primacy in economic decisions.

For a clear difference, not only in West Virginia, but nationwide, there is an ever more obvious need for an American party of labor. Above we outlined some areas where this strike could have been expanded and extended. Think of what a workers' party could have done to facilitate this expansion of the strike. Help with organizing other workers in

support of the strike, help in explaining how this strike by the teachers would help all workers everywhere, assistance in gathering even more community support, including financial assistance, but mostly just organizing all of this support into one bloc that could have turned ?some? concessions into a complete and clear victory.

Because, as it is, this is not an unequivocal victory for teachers and the working class in West Virginia. The teachers themselves recognize this by the way they are now talking about how to pay for their raises. They recognize that robbing from the poorest, the elderly and the most needy to pay for their raises is not an unqualified victory. Yet this is the way this raise will be paid for if the pressure is not continued. A workers' party could continue to pressure the employees of the elites in the legislature into a fair solution for paying for these raises.

A workers' party that is actually on the side of workers and not trying to walk a tightrope as a ?party for all classes? like the Democrats claim to be, might even be able to win some elections and guarantee a solution that benefits workers before the bosses.

The teachers' unions spent political money in West Virginia's last gubernatorial election to elect Jim Justice as a Democrat to office. He then promptly changed his clothes and became a Republican. He stole the mandate given him by the workers of the state and under the state and federal constitutions there is nothing that they can do about it till the next election. That?s capitalist democracy for you!

The money spent in electing him would obviously have been better spent on getting a workers' party on the ballot in West Virginia and then electing a candidate who would actually support workers, rather than a turncoat who will betray the working class at every turn. And it's not just in West Virginia that this betrayal happens, it's across the entire country. Even if they don't change parties, the Democrats still don't represent you any more than the Republicans do.

So congratulations to the teachers of West Virginia for their solidarity, their militant drive, their organizing ability, and their willingness to take action in spite of the obstacles they faced. And congratulations on their partial victory. But next time we need to go for the unqualified win and not stop halfway.

To ensure this, it is necessary for teachers to clear out the dead wood union leadership that tried repeatedly to sell them out and eventually sold them short. Teachers need a democratic union with an easily recallable leadership, paid the average wage of the members. They need rules that put control of negotiations during a strike in the hands of of the strikers, their elected representatives and major decisions in the hands of their mass meetings.

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