

Teacher strikes reinvigorating labor

A recent wave of successful strikes by public school teachers is energizing the labor movement and inspiring others to stand up for students.

In the last few decades, some public school systems and their employees have experienced neglect and spending cuts brought on by austerity measures in bad economic times, assaults on labor union rights and general cuts in state spending. The failure to support education is finally catching up with state legislators and school districts as teachers push back.

Teacher salaries have fallen compared to average worker salaries over the past quarter-century in all 42 states where the U.S. Department of Labor has comparable data.

The wave of strikes started last February in West Virginia, where a grassroots movement by teachers led

to a wildcat walk-out that lasted two weeks.

The Mountain State teachers' frustration had reached a boiling point over failed attempts to raise teacher pay, inadequate health insurance and a proposal in the state legislature to eliminate teacher seniority. Teachers in a few counties staged "walk-ins" by walking picket lines before classes began, while others protested at the state capitol building in Charleston.

On Feb. 22, more than 20,000 teachers and public school employees walked out and shut down schools, affecting all 55 West Virginia counties. After standing firm during the strike despite threats of legal action, teachers returned to their classrooms on March 7 when the legislature approved a 5 percent boost in teacher pay.

Teachers in several other states with consistently low pay and inad-

equate spending on schools quickly followed.

Oklahoma teachers stopped work in April for 10 days to protest low wages and crowded classrooms. The state responded by boosting pay for teachers and support staff and sending more resources to schools.

Following the Oklahoma success, teachers and other school employees held walk-outs and protests in Georgia and Kentucky before another statewide strike in Arizona began on April 26.

The Arizona legislature had failed to restore spending for schools and teacher pay following cuts made in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Spending per student had dropped by 14 percent, making its education system one of the worst-funded in the nation.

Despite a pre-emptive offer of a pay boost by Gov. Doug Ducey, thousands of Arizona teachers walked out of their

classrooms on April 26. As with the previous strikes and protests, the Arizona teachers showed that their concerns extended to students, not just themselves, as they demanded more resources and smaller classrooms to improve education for their students.

"Educator pay is a piece of it," Noah Karvelis, a Phoenix music teacher, told *The Washington Post*. "But it's really about funding education."

Once they had won a better deal that included boosts in pay for other staff and increased spending on schools, Arizona teachers ended their strike on May 3.

Angry over low pay and underfunded pensions, Colorado teachers launched a strike the



Teachers in Los Angeles walked out in January.

day after Arizona teachers walked out. They won concessions from the state and returned to work on May 12.

A proposal in the state legislature to fine and jail teachers who strike was rejected after harsh criticism.

In December, teachers at 15 charter schools in Chicago went on strike for a week and won pay raises.

The rising chorus of angry educators continued this year when 30,000 teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District walked out on Jan. 14 to protest low pay, large class sizes and inadequate support staff. The Los Angeles strike ended a week later, after negotiations yielded a boost in pay and a cut in class sizes.

In recent weeks, teachers across Virginia have participated in work actions such as walk-outs.

It's likely that more strikes and protests will follow as 2019 progresses, as the wave of activism that began last year in West Virginia has only scratched the surface of teacher, student and parent frustration with neglected schools.

But inadequate funding of education isn't the only driver of the resurgence of worker activism. The rise of grassroots labor action among teachers is a backlash against recent right-wing assaults on union rights, from right-to-work laws to rolling back the collective-bargaining rights of public-sector unions to the recent *Janus* Supreme Court decision abolishing the power of public-sector unions to charge fees to non-members they must represent in lieu of dues.



By whittling away collective-bargaining rights and union powers in state legislatures and through the courts, anti-union forces have left workers with no choice but to return to old-school tactics such as walk-outs. The balance of power that preserved stability and promoted resolving disputes through negotiation has eroded, leaving picket lines, marches and strikes as the few tools left for aggrieved workers.

"Unions have tended throughout most of their histories to be forces that seek stability, not unrest," Joseph A. McCartin, a labor historian at Georgetown University, told *The New York Times*. "When they are weakened, we're more likely to see the re-emergence of instability and militancy, and the kind of model that we're seeing happen in West Virginia."

The consequence of attacks on unions is that workers will fight back, and the fight is likely to continue, especially in states that have tried to weaken unions.

"It's heartening to see teachers and other public employees defying the assaults on workers' rights and standing up for students—and forcing the states to listen," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "As we look back on the historic change that our own action, the Great Postal Strike of 1970, brought, we can appreciate the sacrifice, and the gains, that teachers are experiencing. We stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters struggling for a better educational system." **PR**

West Virginia teachers on strike in 2018