West Virginia's school employees teach US labor a huge lesson

written by Lois Weiner | February 24, 2018

As the AFL-CIO holds its day of action across the US, protesting what has been cast as a likely loss in the Janus case, which the Right intends to use to destroy labor and the Left, a movement of school employees in West Virginia is showing organized labor what it means to be a union without the right to strike and without collective bargaining.

West Virginia is a "right to work" state and bars strikes by public employees, yet schools in every county in the state closed because school employees had shown they would not come to work on Thursday or Friday. Although officers of the state affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT-West Virginia) and the National Education Association (West Virginia Education Association) are asked to speak for the strikers and are regarded as the movement's leaders, most participating in the walkouts are not union members, and the unions cannot bargain legally-binding contracts on behalf of teachers and school employees.

As occurred in Detroit when teachers organized "sick outs" about appalling conditions in their schools, the group of West Virginia teachers who took the lead in organizing this movement did so independent of the union apparatus. They invited teachers in both the NEA and AFT affiliates, which had historically spent resources fighting one another, as well as all school employees in other job categories, to join the actions, "keeping it open" as one activist described their strategy. Within months the movement mushroomed, the closed Facebook page expanding to 17,000 members. School workers were frustrated and angry at low wages to be further diminished by higher costs for health insurance, in policies imposed by the state legislature and governor. Many school workers knew of West Virginia's history of labor battles in the coal fields, memories of which still resonate. This inspired them. Many teachers identify with workers and labor, not always the case because of teachers' educational credentials and social class aspirations and origins. Still West Virginia is a state that is attuned to class inequality: Sanders won the Democratic primary – while Trump carried the state in the general election.

Understanding this movement's success requires seeing that the unions that ostensibly spoke for teachers and other school workers did not to tap into or build this labor consciousness nor use its resources to mobilize actions that addressed anger at poor wages. The unions' strategy was to court state politicians with donations and votes, finding a new "friend" after each betrayal. In contrast, the activists who built the movement, many of them socialists, believed that traditional labor tactics, ranging from rallies to walkouts, were essential and that their colleagues throughout the state would respond, if provided leadership that should have come from the teachers unions.

They were right. The movement developed at breathtaking speed, protests and local walkouts expanding to a state-wide strike and mass protests in the state legislature. Teachers and school workers confronted legislators who refused to raise wages and alter health care costs taken from

their paychecks. At each step, the movement has made demands on the union, prepared to carry out actions without union endorsement or help. In the process they have gone far in making the union carry out its responsibilities to them – and to public education. A key concern of teachers is that by keeping wages so low, West Virginia has created a teacher "shortage" that it has "solved" by allowing people who have no preparation to teach to become teachers – a strategy being adopted in many other states.

The West Virginia struggle has shown the energy of the 2012 strike of the Chicago Teachers Union. But it also resembles what occurred in Madison, Wisconsin when public employees, teachers in the forefront, took their defense of collective bargaining to the state legislature, occupying the seat of power. Labor was badly bruised in that battle because workers did what union officials instructed: they disbanded the protest and channeled power into recalling Scott Walker, the Governor. The alternative was to maintain the strike while building more public support by expanding their political program beyond collective bargaining, to other economic and political rights that have been attacked. That same choice confronts the movement in West Virginia. One logical expansion of their political struggle is to demand a state-wide "single payer" health plan to cover medical care for everyone in the state. Public employees who face higher costs for health care will find natural allies with parents who cannot afford insurance or are worried about cutbacks to Medicaid and Medicare. That alliance is part of the growing move within labor for "Medicare for all," a struggle that requires fighting Democrats who won't break with their party leadership's rejection of "single payer" as unrealistic. The demand can also weaken the grip of Republicans who won't break with the GOP – and Trump – about funding health care as a human right.

Officers of large public employee unions have said that Janus has caused deep introspection and change, but their actions have not reflected their rhetoric about member engagement. While the unions are reaching out to "involve," "engage," and "hear" members, they don't see the need to encourage self-organization of workers. The consciousness and capacity of workers to organize at the work site is what will save labor. West Virginia's school employees have demonstrated what workers' power looks like without collective bargaining or the right to strike. Their lesson is clear to the unions: Either fight for the dignity of work and workers or move over and let others show you how it's done.

A version of this article was published in In These Times *with the accompanying photo.*

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