



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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