

Teachers and communities unite to win

written by Scott Scheffer
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Oakland teachers

March 2 — After seven days on strike, members of the Oakland Education Association (OEA) have reached a tentative deal in what seems a resounding victory!

A vote to ratify the deal is scheduled to take place on Saturday, March 2.

According to [OEA's website](#), where more detailed information is available, the offer includes an 11 percent salary increase over four years, a 3 percent bonus, more focus on retaining teachers (Oakland has a very low retention rate of teachers because of the astronomical cost of housing.), lower classroom sizes, a five-month moratorium on the planned closure of 24 Oakland schools, a moratorium on the growth of charter schools and other advances.

Oakland's school board could only have been stunned by the energy, militancy and widespread support demonstrated during the strike. They have been trying to meet to discuss \$20.2 million in budget cuts for the next school year, but board members were blocked from entering the building by union members and the board had to postpone their budget meeting twice. Charter school workers sent messages of solidarity and joined the picket lines. Thousands of students marched through Oakland in solidarity with their teachers.

The demands in the Oakland strike were very similar to those in the strike that took place in Los Angeles in early January: salary increases, smaller classroom sizes, more nurses, counselors, librarians and other support staff, and more oversight of charter schools. All of the demands are linked to the growth of charter schools, which draw funds away from public education budgets, yet are not subject to regulation and oversight that defends equality in education. As charters have become more prevalent, public education budgets have been starved for funds and have lost students and other staff.

The current and ongoing series of teachers' strikes nationally in 2018 and 2019 began with a February 2018 teachers' strike in West Virginia. West Virginia teachers were among the lowest paid in the country. The strike was initially unauthorized; in other words, it started as a wildcat strike. The odds against successful labor actions in a right-to-work state are stacked heavily in favor of the bosses. Politicians and the

courts have progressively confined workers' ability to organize inside a restricting fence of legality. Year after year, the fenced in area gets smaller and smaller, and that has been especially true in so-called right-to-work states. It wasn't entirely expected that West Virginia teachers would win, but they did. They won a 5 percent wage increase for all public employees in West Virginia. Their strike did something else that was unexpected, too. It raised awareness nationwide about the growing exploitation of teachers and other education workers, and about the defunding of public education. Their struggle made people more aware that as the giant capitalist economy in the U.S. has transitioned from an industrial economy to a service economy, what was supposed to be one of the high ideals of capitalism — public education — is being thrown overboard as part of the broad corporate offensive against unions, an offensive that has continued for decades.

Even more importantly, it also reminded workers that when we fight back — we win! By the summer of 2018, teachers' strikes had broken out in Oklahoma, Washington, Arizona, Kentucky, Colorado and North Carolina. Among those states only Colorado is not a right-to-work state. Each strike yielded at least a partial victory, and even in states where there weren't strikes on the horizon, state governments noticed that the militancy was spreading. Arkansas, New Mexico, Maryland, South Carolina and Louisiana are among states in which increases in funding for teachers' salaries have happened or are likely to happen.

Teachers have continued fighting back in 2019 with a January strike in Los Angeles in which it became clear that they were striking for their students and to defend public education as much as to defend their rights as workers. Agreement on salary was close near the beginning of the strike, but the negotiating team held out for more funding for badly needed librarians, counselors, lower class sizes and reduced testing. The strike ended with a gain on almost every demand, including a salary increase, more money for support staff, class size reductions and a cap on charter schools. Los Angeles has the highest number of charter schools — 274 — in the

country.

On Feb. 11, after 15 months of negotiations, 2,000 members of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) struck. Colorado's teachers are among the lowest paid in the country, earning an average of \$46,155 in 2016, so salary increases were a major issue.

After just three days on the picket line, DCTA won a pay increase of 11.25 percent and cost of living increases in the future for all public education staff. They also won a new promotion system based on seniority, experience and training that was an answer to a bonus system that was based on "merit."

WV teachers act: Bad law? It shall not pass!

In an interesting twist in the teachers' 2018/2019 strike timeline, soon after the victory in Denver, teachers in West Virginia came to the forefront again. This time, an issue that didn't exist in West Virginia at the time of their strike one year ago sparked another walkout, and West Virginia teachers turned the tables on bosses and politicians, who are accustomed to have the courts and legal system at their disposal. Teachers soundly defeated a bill working its way through the state legislature that would have legalized charter schools in West Virginia — sweetened by an additional 5 percent salary increase for teachers. The [Feb. 20 Washington Post](#) reported on the reaction to the offer of a 5 percent salary increase: "Teachers are willing to forsake their raises for the proposition that public education must be protected and that their voices must be protected," said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who went to Charleston, W.Va., for the strike on Tuesday. "I am done being disrespected," said Jessica Maunz Salfia, who teaches at Spring Mills High School in Berkeley County, W.Va.

Charters have been legalized in 43 states and the District of Columbia, but are still not legal in West Virginia. Unions representing public school workers have lost a lot

of membership over the years as both Democratic and Republican politicians have jumped on the “school choice” bandwagon.

How did the workers turn back this legislation? Did they send a team to lobby some politicians who were on the fence? Did they offer to concede on some other issue in return for support against this bill? Did they promise to canvas for some Democrat in the next primary? None of that. They walked off the job en masse in what was their second strike in less than a year. Teachers in 54 of West Virginia’s 55 counties struck and hundreds of union members occupied the rotunda of the state Capitol building in Charleston just like they did in 2018!

It was within hours of the beginning of the strike on Tuesday, Feb. 19, that the education bill was pulled from the floor. Wary of politicians’ treachery, and as if adding an exclamation point at the end of a sentence, the unions added one more day to the strike so that their message would be clear. When they were confident that the bill really was dead, the strike was called off. Then on Thursday, after they went back to teaching, the West Virginia House of Delegates and Senate passed a different bill. This one simply gave the teachers the 5 percent raise. Yes! This all really happened in a right-to-work state.

