



Speak Out Now

Revolutionary Workers Group

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The Strike in West Virginia – An Example for us All

On Thursday, February 22, teachers in two of West Virginia's fifty-five counties walked out. By Monday, March 1, schools shut down state-wide. Thousands of teachers and staff rallied in Charleston demanding raises and protesting increases in healthcare premiums. Eight days later, the Republican-dominated state government capitulated, granting a 5% raise to all state employees. The government also agreed to delay cuts to healthcare benefits for 16 months. This strike is not just a victory for the West Virginia teachers and state workers, it is an example for all of us and one that could quickly spread.

The starting pay for teachers in WV is \$34,000 and staff make even less. Some teachers are on food stamps and many more have additional part-time jobs. School employees haven't had a raise in four years and healthcare costs have soared. The strike began after the West Virginia legislature passed a budget with only a 2% wage increase and a 1% raise in the following two years. Also, the budget included measures to increase teachers' healthcare charges by \$300 a month in 2019. As one striker put it, "I only clear \$1300 every two weeks and they're wanting to take \$300 more away from me. But they tell me that's okay because we're going to give you a 1% pay raise. That equals out to 88¢ every two days."

The teachers' strike came after months of organizing by teachers independent of their union officials. In the beginning, some teachers set up a Facebook group to discuss how to organize against the politicians and timid union officials. Eventually 20,000 teachers and staff joined the Facebook group and teams of teachers began to reach out across school district boundaries.

Teachers called meetings of all employees regardless of union affiliation to build unity. Most West Virginia communities are impoverished and many children depend on school lunches. In anticipation of the strike, teachers filled backpacks with food for students and their families. As the strike continued, teachers set up distribution points for families to receive packages of food, and some teachers personally delivered boxes of food to the students' homes. They also reached out to parents explaining why they would strike. As a result, many West Virginia workers and parents of the students joined the teachers' rallies.

Discussion among teachers became more intense when union officials said the strike should be a "rolling" strike, shutting down a few school districts at a time. At district meetings and on the Facebook group, most teachers stated that they didn't believe this would stop the cuts. Contrary to what the union officials were saying, sentiment in the schools was that a strike should be "all in or not at all,"



in the words of one elementary school teacher. When the strike spread, the teachers' favorite hashtags became #55Strong and #55United.

The strike caught West Virginia's politicians and union officials off guard. On the second day of the statewide strike, the governor announced that he had found money in the budget and agreed with union officials for a 5% raise. Union officials told teachers to return to work. However, the teachers who had organized continuous mass demonstrations in the state capital refused to return to work until the state legislature passed a budget guaranteeing the 5% raise, and addressed the problem of funding state employees' healthcare. By the end of the strike's first week, it was clear that the legislature was in no hurry to pass a law guaranteeing the 5% raise and that the politicians' only commitment was to study proposals to manage healthcare costs. At this point, the union officials had no choice but to agree that the strike should continue until the state legislature approved the immediate 5% raise.

At first the strike received little attention outside of West Virginia, but rank-and-file teachers in other states began to take notice, especially in Arizona and Kentucky. Oklahoma TV stations reported that Oklahoma teachers, who are the lowest paid in the nation, have been discussing plans to strike in April at well-attended local meetings and on Facebook.

West Virginia teachers hoped to win guarantees for their health benefits by instituting higher taxes on the

companies which exploit West Virginia's gas, oil and coal. They did not succeed in winning this demand. They only got a promise that teacher representatives will be on the commission to study potential solutions. But the teachers have experienced a victory and West Virginia politicians and bosses could have a real fight on their hands if the West Virginia government tries to push more cuts in healthcare in 2019.

West Virginia teachers won because they took four important steps:

1. Teachers organized at the local level so that all teachers could make the decisions together and be involved day-to-day in carrying out their decisions.
2. Teachers used their power to stop the union officials from making decisions they didn't agree with.
3. Teachers didn't trust the politicians' promises, and they stayed on strike until the government gave in and agreed to fund the money for their raises.
4. Teachers recognized that the strike would cause problems for students and their families, so they addressed those issues directly, like when they supplied them with food. This helped win them broad community support.

The example of how the teachers in West Virginia organized to win should be an inspiration to all workers who are sick and tired of the boss dictating how things have to be.

Trump's Budget Declares War at Home and Abroad

The Trump administration's budget for 2019 is a declaration of war on poor and working people all over the world and in the U.S. The \$4.4 trillion budget proposes a combination of further increases in military spending, more tax cuts to the super rich, and cuts to working families and the poor – all in addition to the massive cuts and corporate handouts from the previous budget. The agenda of the administration couldn't be any clearer – they are ready to defend their class of billionaire bankers and CEOs at all costs, even nuclear war.

Trump's budget calls for \$716 billion in military spending, an increase of \$195 billion over the next two years, which includes adding 25,900 soldiers to the military, building ten new warships, increasing production of warplanes, and even planning to produce more nuclear weapons. Trump explained these goals as follows: "We're going to have the strongest military we've ever had by far. We're increasing arsenals of virtually every weapon. We're modernizing and creating brand new – a brand new nuclear force."

A recent Pentagon strategy document ("2018 National Defense Strategy") submitted by Defense Secretary James Mattis, argues for a massive military buildup to defend U.S. economic dominance throughout the world, and to prepare for possible war with China, Russia, and North Korea. In the document, Mattis warns of severe damage to U.S. companies and their profits if this military buildup is not enormous:

Failure to meet our defense objectives will result in decreasing U.S. global influence...reduced access to markets...a decline in our prosperity and standard of living. Without sustained...investment to restore readiness and modernize our military...we will rapidly lose our military advantage.

Trump, along with Mattis and others, have called for an increase in the U.S. arsenal of nuclear weapons, and are proposing to build smaller nuclear weapons to make them more usable in military conflict. But these so-called "small" nuclear weapons are at least as destructive as the nuclear weapons dropped on Hiroshima and later on Nagasaki during World War II, killing about 150,000 people shortly after each bomb was detonated. In other words, the Trump administration is ready to increase the risk of nuclear war, a possibility Mattis has defended by saying, "We must look reality in the eye and see the world as it is, not as we wish it to be."

And in order to help pay for the military budget, over \$1.8 trillion in cuts to social services for workers and the poor have been proposed. These include cuts to food stamps and housing assistance for the poor, cuts to education, environmental protections, and more. The budget also calls for \$3.4 billion more in funding for the Department of Homeland Security in order to intensify attacks against immigrants. And the budget proposes \$18 billion for expanding the border wall with Mexico and hiring 2,750 new ICE and Border Patrol Agents.

The Trump administration couldn't be clearer which side they are on. The same is true for the Democrats. They may try to position themselves as an opposition to Trump, but it is an opposition in words only. For the most part, Democrats represent the same agenda – voting 89% in support of the \$696.5 billion military budget passed in July of 2017. In order to maintain this system, they demand further attacks on our standard of living, increased destruction of the environment, an intensification of war, and the looming prospect of nuclear war. If they have it their way, the future they have in store for working people around the world couldn't be worse.



Martin Luther King Jr., April 1968 and Our Struggle Today

In early April 1968, fifty years ago this month, Martin Luther King, Jr. was in Memphis to support the sanitation workers' strike. The workers – almost all of them African American – had been on strike since February 12, demanding higher wages, safer working conditions, and union recognition. Two workers died on February 1 when they were trapped in a malfunctioning garbage compactor. Just four years earlier, two other workers had died the same way, but city officials did not replace the machinery. The sanitation workers weren't going to take it anymore. During the strike, they held daily mass meetings and marches. Police attacked them with mace and guns. The mayor, police chief, and other officials were openly racist. They brought in white strikebreakers.

But the sanitation workers stood their ground. The Black community around Memphis supported them with mass meetings. Civil rights activists from around the country came to Memphis. Everyone knew that this was both a workers' fight and a civil rights struggle.

King's assassination on April 4 brought global attention to what was going on in Memphis. People in Memphis went into the streets to demonstrate their rage. Their rebellion spread to more than 110 cities. The authorities used more than 45,000 National Guard and 21,000 regular federal soldiers to repress the rebellions. Thirty-nine people were killed, 2,500 injured, and about 14,000 arrested. The cities with the most people killed were Chicago, Washington, Baltimore, Kansas City, Cincinnati, Detroit, and Memphis.

On April 8, in Memphis, 42,000 people participated in a silent march. The strike ended in victory on April 16 with a settlement that included union recognition and wage increases, but the workers had to threaten to strike again to force the city officials to honor the agreements.

The Memphis sanitation workers' strike and the mass upheavals around the country came just a few years after the enactment of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Those pieces of legislation were victories in the struggle against racism. But they did not address issues of jobs, income, housing, education, police violence, and other aspects of racism across the U.S. The Memphis strike was a key step in broadening the struggle to include issues of jobs and income.

A few months before his assassination, King said:

There is something wrong with capitalism...The evils of capitalism are as real as the evils of militarism and racism...One day we must ask the question, 'Why are there forty million poor people in America?' And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy.

And we have to ask the question now because the situation has not improved since King's time. Data just released from recent studies shows that:

- 7.5% of African Americans were unemployed in 2017,

compared to 6.7% in 1968 – and that is still roughly twice the rate of whites.

- The share of incarcerated African Americans has nearly tripled between 1968 and 2016, increasing the gulf between whites and Blacks.
- The wealth gap between white and Black Americans has more than tripled in the past 50 years. The typical Black family had zero overall wealth in 1968. Today the median net worth of white families – \$171,000 – is ten times that of Black families.
- Despite the poverty rate dropping from more than a third of Black households in 1968 to about a fifth of Black households, African Americans are 2.5 times more likely to be in poverty than whites.

These are just a few of the ways in which the racism of this society has worsened in the last 50 years despite the courageous struggles of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement that followed. And King was right: capitalism is the real source of poverty and inequality, and racism is one of the key forms of inequality.

So how should we address the issues today? What can we learn from 1968?

The Memphis sanitation workers were fighting against both racism and class exploitation. King went there to support that struggle. At the same time, his organization was starting the Poor People's Campaign, uniting whites and Blacks against the economic system that kept them in poverty. Some believe that the government had him assassinated because he was beginning to organize working people on class terms while fighting racial injustice. During the following year, the FBI and Chicago cops assassinated Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark for the same reason.

Economic conditions have gotten worse for working people over the last 50 years – and more so for African Americans. Today we need to start where the Black liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s left off. Despite their victories, capitalism has remained intact. So the struggle continues today, against both racism and capitalism.



Baltimore Police: The System is Corrupt

The Gun Trace Task Force of the Baltimore City Police Department (BPD) was a special unit organized officially to get guns off the streets and prevent violence. But eight of the nine members of the Task Force were charged with a variety of crimes. Six pleaded guilty and two others were convicted of crimes, including using their power as cops to rob people of cash, drugs, and jewelry, planting toy guns as fake evidence when they killed someone who was unarmed, charging the city for overtime when they weren't working, and other kinds of racketeering.

the police and fear them for good reason. Among the specific findings:

- "African Americans accounted for 95% of the [pedestrians] BPD stopped at least ten times. One African American man...was stopped 30 times in less than four years... None of the 30 stops resulted in a citation or criminal charge."
- "African Americans accounted for 82% of all BPD vehicle stops, compared to only 60% of the driving age population in the city and 27% of the driving age population in the [region]."
- "[We found] large racial disparities in BPD's arrests for drug possession... While African Americans use drugs at rates similar to or slightly exceeding other population groups, BPD arrested African Americans for drug possession at five times the rate of others."

These are just the tip of the iceberg of the 163-page report. Why is this so rampant? Is it racism? Yes, in part. But many of the cops involved in the mistreatment of Blacks in Baltimore have themselves been African American. While Baltimore's experience may seem off the charts, it is representative of police crimes nationally. Black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than white people. Less than one-third of Black people killed by police in 2014 were suspected of a violent crime and allegedly armed. In 99% of such cases in 2015, the cops were not convicted. We have to ask what else in police culture contributes to cops' crimes?

The official role of police is supposedly to protect "law and order." But whose law and what order? They are supposed to "protect and serve." But protect and serve whom? Do they protect working people from losing their jobs when a corporation automates those jobs out of existence? No. Do they stop landlords from raising rents? No. Do they stop insurance companies from gouging us

on healthcare? No.

The old expression is that "possession is nine-tenths of the law," meaning that under this economic system property "rights" are more important than other human needs, including life itself. The law says that capitalists can make people work long hours under brutal conditions if the workers let them get away with it – all to make the most profits. In this corrupt and violent system, is it any wonder that police brutality is rampant and so many officers are corrupt?



A protest in Baltimore following the murder of Freddie Gray

This corruption scandal follows Freddie Gray's murder while in police custody in 2015 and the subsequent Justice Department investigation that found extreme racial discrimination in the BPD's practices. The Justice Department's findings detailed racial disparities "at every stage of [BPD's] enforcement actions," showing constant violations of African Americans' civil rights. These included "(1) making unconstitutional stops, searches, and arrests, (2) using enforcement strategies that produce severe and unjustified disparities in the rates of stops, searches and arrests of African Americans, (3) using excessive force, and (4) retaliating against people engaging in constitutionally-protected expression." So people in Baltimore don't trust

Film Review: *Black Panther*

Black Panther is a big budget superhero film written and directed by Ryan Coogler and actor Michael B. Jordan. *Black Panther* is the story of the superhero king of Wakanda, an isolated but wealthy African nation that hides its existence. Through the story, the Black Panther is confronted with a question: should Wakanda stay hidden or fight to help Black people worldwide? *Black Panther*, like Coogler and Johnson's other films, addresses the oppression Black people face in this society. These issues rarely appear in a superhero movie, let alone in one of the highest grossing movies of all time!

Black Panther certainly shares many defects of superhero movies – macho characters, violence, implausible and unrealistic elements. But to imagine a society like Wakanda is to imagine Black life in a society without the legacy of slavery and the daily reality of racism. This is the powerful, provocative message of *Black Panther*: it asks us to imagine life for Black people without racism, and that fighting Black oppression in the world is a goal worthy of a superhero, who is after all just a stand-in for our own wishes and dreams.

Where We Stand

The world we live in today is increasingly ruled by prejudice and fear, under a system of widespread violence and war, where exploitation and oppression are the rule, with the many dominated by the few. The name of this system is capitalism.

The Force For Change Exists Today

Everywhere, working people's labor makes society run. Working people have the power to bring this system to a halt and bring about the changes needed. Like slavery, feudalism and other systems that enriched the minority at the expense of the majority, capitalism's removal is long overdue. The time for socialism has come.

We Stand For Socialism

- A world based on peaceful collaboration and international cooperation of working class people – not the exploiters who rule today.
- The common ownership and sharing of the world's resources and productive capacity.
- An egalitarian and democratic government, organized and controlled from the bottom up.

- Protection of the world's ecological systems, putting science to work to sustain life, not destroy it.
- A society where human relations are based on respect, equality and dignity of all peoples, not racism, sexism or homophobia.

Who We Are

We believe the international working class is the social force that can transform society and create a new world. But to do so, revolutionary organizations must be built in the working class. For this reason our group aims its activity primarily at workplaces, where struggles have the most potential to transform the world. Our newsletters are a tool to begin this work. What a handful of people decide today can determine our future. Join us to work for a better future – one that is both necessary and possible.

Contact us at:

San Francisco Bay Area

speakout@revolutionaryworkers.org

Baltimore

baltimore@revolutionaryworkers.org

New York/New Jersey Area

ny.nj@revolutionaryworkers.org

This newspaper and other publications are available online:

www.revolutionaryworkers.org