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West Virginia Offers a Blueprint to Combat School Privatization

By Jeff Bryant, Independent Media Institute

West Virginia's most recent statewide teacher walkout [came and went](#) so quickly there was too little time and attention to comprehend and appreciate the impact the teachers' actions will likely have long-term on changing the narrative of the teacher movement and how politically progressive advocates and candidates relate to it.

In the very first day of the strike, teachers [squelched new state legislation](#) they objected to and then held out an additional day to ensure it would die. The day after schools reopened, the [teachers got what they wanted](#)—a “clean” bill increasing teacher pay five percent. But, unlike their [largely successful labor action from last year](#), this time the teachers weren't making pocketbook issues the focal points of their demands. Instead, [it was all about](#) stopping school privatization through charter schools and a new voucher program. The point of the strike was to oppose a Senate bill that included bringing charters and a voucher program to the state even though the measure included the pay raise teachers wanted. Teachers [accompanied their protests](#) in the capitol building with chants of “Hey-hey, ho-ho, charter schools have got to go.”

This was a huge gamble for the teachers, not only because they risked a confrontation with the wealthy establishment that backs charters and vouchers but also because they could alienate the coalition of progressive activists who had supported teachers in the past but had never forcefully opposed charter schools.

Teachers Take a Risk

“There had been no widespread debate on charter schools in West Virginia until now,” Gary Zuckett tells me. Zuckett and the West Virginia Citizen Action Group (WVCAG) for which he serves as executive director gladly joined with other social, economic, and environmental justice movements across the state last year to back West Virginia teachers in their demands for a pay raise and a fix to the state's broken public employee health program. But neither WVCAG nor the groups' national affiliate People's Action had ever before made opposition to school privatization a major policy point.

“It's true—at the national level, progressives don't talk a lot about K-12 and charter schools,” says Ryan Frankenberry, executive director of the West Virginia Working Families Party, a

hyper-local political party that backs candidates largely for their stances on social, economic, and environmental values and their opposition to big money in politics.

So it was never a sure thing should West Virginia teachers make their stand on opposition to charters that the progressive coalition that backed last year's strike would have their backs.

Clarifying the Politics of Privatization

When teachers began walking off the job across the country last year, their demands were similar to those that progressive policy activists have long supported, such as workers' rights, higher wages, and better funding for public services like education.

But for years, the politics of school privatization efforts have been confusing. Charters and school voucher programs have been [falsely framed](#) as a civil rights cause. Former President Barack Obama [gave charter schools a big boost](#) in his administration's Race to the Top program. Popular Democratic politicians like New Jersey U.S. senator and presidential candidate Cory Booker have [strongly backed](#) voucher programs and taken campaign donations from the charter school industry. Progressive leaders like Vermont U.S. senator and presidential candidate Bernie Sanders [have been vague on their views](#) about charters. And progressive advocacy groups have either [generally supported charters](#) or [declined to take a position](#).

But in this year's walkouts, teachers have raised the stakes in challenging progressives to come down firmly on their side to oppose further expansion of privatization efforts.

Teacher Strikes Change Minds

Beginning with the strike in Los Angeles, teachers began [adding opposition to charter schools](#) to their other demands and [making a case](#) that these taxpayer-funded, privately operated schools are harmful to public schools.

"The flavor of the teacher strikes has changed," [writes Education Week reporter](#) Madeline Will. "Unlike last year, when teachers across the country shared a similar narrative of crumbling classrooms and stagnant paychecks, the strike demands now are far-reaching. Now, teachers are pushing back against education-reform policies, like charter schools ... There's no clearer evidence of the shift in teacher activism than in West Virginia."

In the Mountain State, progressives shifted into the anti-privatization column "because of these strikes," says Frankenberry. "Teachers were able to convince people that resisting charters and vouchers was about fighting for the future of public schools."

Progressive organizers in the state also can't deny what they see and hear about the conditions in their public schools and how they'd be affected by the introduction of charters. "Teachers already know their schools are strapped for cash," says Zuckett. "The state is already losing its population of school-aged children," he notes, adding that the school where his wife works as a counselor lost 10 percent of its students this year alone. "Any loss of resources is going to hurt our schools."

Strikes Spread to Oakland

As soon as the walkout in West Virginia resolved, a teacher strike in Oakland, California, quickly flamed up.

That strike [resembles the strike in Los Angeles](#) in which teachers demanded better pay, smaller class sizes, more nurses, counselors and other support staff, as well as an end to the spread of charter schools. But the negative impact of charter schools is likely even worse in Oakland, where the charters [enroll 30 percent of the students](#) in the district and siphon over \$57 million from the public schools. To further accommodate the charters, the district has announced plans to close 24 public schools.

As of this writing, Oakland teachers are still on strike, declaring in their [latest press release](#), “When 19 out of every 20 teachers... [are] walking the picket line joined by parents, when our rallies attract thousands, when 97 percent of our students stay home—it’s clear that this community wants what [the teachers’ union] demands.”

As the opposition to charters surges to the front of teacher strikes in Oakland, a [new bill](#) swiftly moving through the state legislature, with the strong backing of Governor Gavin Newsom, will tighten oversight of charter schools and demand more financial transparency of them.

The growing opposition to charters spurred by teacher strikes has the charter industry worried. As Politico [reports](#), the success teachers have had in “blaming charter schools for squeezing traditional schools ... has raised alarm among charter school backers ... who see it as unfair to blame the charter sector for financial woes.”

The growing conflict and sharply contrasting points of view will likely pressure political candidates and progressive activists on the left to take sides.

‘The Fight Is On’

Democrats in West Virginia are “absolutely solidified against charters,” says Frankenberry. “Even more solidified on this than they are on gun control.”

He concedes, however, there are still unresolved issues in how progressives will coalesce on charters elsewhere. His progressive colleagues in states with lots of charters still feel an urge to not totally reject charters because parents whose children attend the schools are often from marginalized communities. And teachers who work in charters are potential targets for labor unions who want to organize the workers.

But he finds in places such as West Virginia, and neighboring Virginia and Kentucky, where there are very few or no charters, opposition to the schools is about saving public education. Opponents are quick to point to high-profile charter school scandals in [Ohio](#) and [Pennsylvania](#) as examples of what would befall their states. “It’s been 20 years of experimenting,” he says, “and experiments often fail.”

Frankenberry’s hope is that the solidarity shown by progressive opposition to school privatization in West Virginia can rub off on his colleagues in states where charters are more

abundant. “We’re showing that we’re not going to accept these schools,” he says. “Maybe the progressive organizers in places where they already have them can get inspiration from us to rein charters in.”

Zuckett foresees opposition to charter schools and voucher programs continuing to be more of a point of contention that progressives will push in their policy positions, and not just in West Virginia. “The fight is on,” he says. “Shame on us if it isn’t.”

To learn more about school privatization, check out [Who Controls Our Schools? The Privatization of American Public Education](#), a free ebook published by the Independent Media Institute.

*[Click here to read a selection](#) of *Who Controls Our Schools?* published on AlterNet, or [here](#) to access the complete text.*

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