

## **Union leaders call for statewide public school workers strike beginning Tuesday**

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Ryan Quinn

A little less than a year since the start of West Virginia's first statewide public school workers strike, leaders of the state's three major school employee unions called Monday evening for another strike to begin, starting Tuesday, over the education overhaul bill.

All but one of West Virginia's 55 countywide public school systems canceled school Tuesday. The outlier was Putnam County, which is among West Virginia's wealthier counties and is near the state Capitol.

"We are taking action," said Fred Albert, president of the West Virginia branch of the American Federation of Teachers union. "We are left no other choice, but, as of tomorrow, we are calling a statewide strike."

He briefly referenced that he's been told there's support in the House of Delegates for a version of the bill that the unions oppose.

Joe White, executive director of the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association, which represents workers like custodians and bus drivers, said his union, the AFT and the local branch of the National Education Association union are unified in the strike.

"Don't start those buses tomorrow," White said at a joint union news conference in front of the state Senate chamber doors.

When asked how long the strike will last, the union leaders said the decision will be made "day by day."

Despite earlier statements from Kanawha County Schools Superintendent Ron Duerring that he would keep schools in the county open during any strike this year, the school system changed course Monday night and announced that schools would, indeed, be closed Tuesday.

"Despite a desire to try to keep schools open, KCS will be closed tomorrow due to a lack of transportation and supervision," the school system said in a news release Monday night. "The status of Wednesday is unknown at this time. We will provide an update as soon as possible."

Last year, workers didn't have to form picket lines around schools because the superintendents of all 55 county school systems officially closed schools before each strike day.

"We'll wait to see what the superintendents will do tomorrow," Dale Lee, president of the West Virginia Education Association, said Monday when asked about how protests would be handled.

Putnam schools spokeswoman Micah Osborne wrote in an email Monday regarding not closing schools that "it is important that our students continue to have the opportunity to learn in a safe

and secure environment. Each day our schools provide much for the students we serve such as a safe and caring environment, meals, and the opportunity to participate in various extra-curricular activities.”

Senate Bill 451 provisions that many public school workers oppose are bundled into one bill that also includes pay raises for them and increased funding for public schools, though a large portion of the new funding would benefit property rich counties more than property poor ones.

The pay raises are those Republican leaders promised a month before the November election, without revealing that they’d be included in a much broader bill. Voters kept Republicans in power in both chambers of the Legislature.

The strike announcement came moments before the state Senate reconvened to continue discussing Senate leaders’ proposed newly amended version of the bill. The amended version passed Monday night on an 18-16 vote and was sent back to the House of Delegates for consideration.

The Senate passed the original bill to the House earlier this legislative session.

That bill angered school workers because it would’ve allowed unlimited charter schools to form in West Virginia, which currently has none, and would’ve provided public money for private-, online- and home-schooling and tutoring through vouchers, called “education savings accounts.” Full-time public school students would be barred from having ESAs.

That version of the bill also would have allowed county boards of education to downplay or disregard seniority in deciding which employees they lay off or transfer to other jobs when they are faced with layoff decisions.

On Thursday, the House passed, 71-29, a version of the bill that greatly diminished these provisions. It restored seniority protection, erased the education savings accounts program and limited charter schools to just two, and said they could be converted only from existing public schools, and only then with the majority approval of parents and employees in those schools.

But the Senate’s amended version, revealed Monday, swung the pendulum back in all three of those areas. Seven charter schools would be allowed, as would education savings accounts, although only 1,000 students could have the ESAs at once, down from 2,500 in the version the Senate originally passed.

Albert said Monday that he doesn’t think the strike call is premature, despite the Senate having not yet sent its amended version back to the House and the House not yet having acted on it when the strike was called.

“They have made this bill so ugly in the Senate, and we’ve been told they have support in the House,” Albert said. “We feel that we have no other measure but to send the message that we’re following this hour by hour and, today, it changed and they moved it through rapidly today. No, we have waited as long as our members have been patient to wait.”

Senate President Mitch Carmichael, R-Jackson, questioned why employees would strike over a bill that would provide more money for nurses and counselors, plus other benefits to public schools.

During last year's strike, Adam Culver, a Huntington Middle teacher, dressed up in a banana suit borrowed from a seventh-grader.

When employees rejected the statewide union leaders' deal with the governor to end last year's strike, and they kept striking anyway, he donned a black suit and continued demonstrating at the Capitol, saying the "banana's turned black."

On Monday evening, he got back in the yellow suit and was at the Capitol. But he said he'd been there off and on for a few weeks already, trying to keep up with the bill, and he now was concerned that the Senate's new amended version has enough votes to pass the House quickly.

"We've been, honestly, fighting it since before it hit the floor," Culver said.

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