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ARIZONA TEACHERS VOTE TO GO ON STRIKE

Teachers are asking for 20% pay raises and increases in state education funding

By Michelle Hackman
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Arizona teachers voted late Thursday to go on strike next week, making the state the fourth this year to host teacher protests in support of increased pay.

The state's union, and organizers of a Facebook group where rank-and-file teachers have been posting, announced the results of a vote at a joint press conference in Phoenix. Seventy-eight percent of teachers who cast ballots supported the protest, they said, and the walkout is set to begin next Thursday.

"This is undeniably and clearly a mandate for action," said Joe Thomas, president of the Arizona Education Association, the state's largest union.

The teachers are asking for 20 percent pay raises and increases in state education funding, which hasn't returned to prerecession levels.

Republican Gov. Doug Ducey, responding to the threat of a strike last week, proposed a plan that would use existing state funds to provide the 20 percent pay increase beginning in the fall of 2020.

But that plan hasn't yet been approved by the state's legislature, and union organizers expressed skepticism about the source of the funds.

Mr. Ducey, in a phone interview, criticized the move. "I don't see how the strike is helping the teachers, I don't know how it's helpful for the kids," he said.

The vote to take statewide action represents a further step in this year's teacher labor actions. Teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Kentucky won concessions from Republican-controlled legislatures after prolonged work stoppages, and organizers in at least a dozen other states, including Colorado and Indiana, are discussing similar tactics.

So far, the strikes have cropped up in states where teacher salaries have fallen most sharply since the 2008-2009 recession, prompted in part by a revenue squeeze as states are forced to spend more on health-care and retirement programs. Unions in those states also have limited legal ability to bargain for changes at the local school-district level.

"Weak unions tend to produce strikes," said Paul Peterson, director of the education policy and governance program at the Harvard Kennedy School.

In Arizona, districts receive on average about 39 percent of their funding from the state budget, leaving districts little wiggle room to boost teacher salaries. At a recent meeting in Paradise Valley, Ariz., the district superintendent handed out Hershey's "Payday" candy bars and told his staff, "I wish they could be real."

“People feel like the state doesn’t respect the job we do as public school teachers,” said Lynn White, a high-school biology teacher in Gilbert, Ariz. She described herself as “not outspoken politically” and said, like most of her colleagues, she has never participated in protests before.

Coordinated activities have been ramping up across the state since March, when West Virginia teachers concluded a nine-day strike after winning a 5 percent across-the-board pay raise from the state legislature.

For several weeks, Arizona teachers have been hosting “walk-ins,” protests where they link arms before the start of the school day and enter schoolhouses as one. They have donned red shirts at the state Capitol and in their communities – red, they said, being the color most reminiscent of education, recalling brick buildings and red ink – popularizing the #RedforEd hashtag.

They have organized largely through a Facebook group, run not by state union leaders but by a 23-year-old elementary-school music teacher named Noah Karvelis.

“I didn’t think it would catch on,” Mr. Karvelis said. “It caught on and spread like crazy.”