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WHY TEACHERS' STRIKES ARE BECOMING A NATIONWIDE MOVEMENT

After big cuts to education, teachers in a number of states take an activist stance—and some GOP legislatures are listening to their demands

By Michelle Hackman
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Alberto Morejon, a teacher in Stillwater, Okla., created a Facebook group early last month with an idea his colleagues called far-fetched: to re-create the statewide teachers strike in West Virginia that led to 5 percent across-the-board pay raises.

One month later, the Facebook group Mr. Morejon created has more than 73,000 members and has helped spark a grass-roots labor movement. The threat of a strike here has prompted the Republican-dominated legislature to pass the first tax increase in 28 years to fund a boost in teacher pay.

"The group was able to be a very, very loud voice that the people who make decisions couldn't ignore," Mr. Morejon said.

On Monday, teachers across the state are planning to walk out to demand a bigger pay raise, prompting widespread school closures and sending parents scrambling to find alternative child-care arrangements. To prepare, unions have coordinated with community centers and churches to provide students food and a place to go, and some districts, including Oklahoma City, sent students home Friday with prepackaged meals because many students depend on schools for free or low-cost meals.

Kentucky teachers also plan to protest in the state capital on Monday against a pension bill rapidly passed through the legislature last week that shifts future teachers into a hybrid between a traditional pension and a 401(k) plan. And unions in Arizona and North Carolina are taking steps toward possible actions over pay and benefits.

The demonstrations come in response to years of steep cuts to state education budgets – but they are also spurred, teachers and their union representatives say, by increased political engagement following President Donald Trump's election and a national Republican party more in touch with its populist roots.

The strategy is a perilous one, as the unions – already unpopular here in Oklahoma – risk appearing to push their luck by asking for more than the \$6,000 average raise awarded them in a bill passed last week.

"A strike is hugely disruptive to families and kids," said Dan Weisberg, CEO of TNTP, a nonprofit group promoting teacher quality. "This is high stakes, and it's of particular risk in low-wage states."

Still, union leaders have taken to heart the lessons of the nine-day West Virginia walkout that concluded in early March. It ended with teachers getting a bigger pay raise.

"The activities in West Virginia really inspired a lot of teachers to believe again that they can change the system, that their voice could be listened to in a real way," said Joe Thomas, president of the Arizona Education Association, which held a rally at the state Capitol last week, where members demanded the state consider its own strike.

In Oklahoma, far from balking, residents last week appeared enthusiastic about the impending walkout. People posted supportive comments on social media, sharing Facebook messages from teachers who posted images of their pay stubs. Some state employees plan to protest along with the teachers.

The state's education budget has fallen by 28 percent since the 2007-09 recession, according to the liberal-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and teachers get paid less than in any other state in the nation.

At the same time, the state has enacted hundreds of millions of dollars in tax cuts, much of them benefiting the state's dominant oil and gas sector. Oklahoma is one of 13 states that requires a supermajority of votes in the legislature – 75 percent – to pass tax increases, making it legally and politically challenging to enact new sources of revenue.

"There was nowhere left to cut to fund education, and when there is nowhere left to cut because of the deepness of your cuts, people realized the reality," said Leslie Osborn, a Republican representative from Mustang, 20 minutes west of Oklahoma City. Ms. Osborn said she was elected as a "fire-breathing" conservative, but as a former House appropriations chair, she said she realized the tax cuts her party had supported were "devastating" the state.

Union activists also say the walkouts have proven to be an effective tool because teachers, like many other Americans following the 2016 election, have stepped up their political engagement. But some analysts also see a new willingness in the Republican party to embrace populist messages.

"The priorities of the party are not running as counter to opposing the unions as they used to," said Nat Malkus, deputy director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a center-right think tank.

The \$6,000 pay raise, passed by the legislature on Wednesday, would be funded in part through a new 5 percent tax on oil and gas production, a feat thought unthinkable here several months ago. Unions in the state have demanded a \$10,000 raise, and the debate over whether they should accept the smaller sum has divided teachers.

Leah Newsom, an elementary school teacher at Garfield STEAM academy in Sand Springs, Okla., said she would opt not to join in the walkout if she decides the state's offer is good enough. But, she added, she has good reason to trust her union.

"I've been in teaching a long time, so I know they're taking it very seriously when they say they want to shut down the schools," she said. "They consider it dire straits."