

**Vox Pop Interviews with Teachers, Students, Union Members, and Community Members at the
West Virginia Teachers' Strike Rally**

Where: State Capitol grounds

Date: February 27, 2018

Location: Charleston, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard and Cathy Kunkel

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 13:08

Voices from the West Virginia Teacher Strike 2.27.18

Rachael Copley, preschool special needs teacher at Cross Lanes Elementary (permission granted to use quote w/ name)

My name is Rachael Copley, I'm a teacher at Cross Lanes Elementary. I teach preschool needs and I am a mom of children in Putnam County Schools, and I am just here today for the most part because of the future of education in West Virginia. It's time for us to take a stand because vacancies aren't being filled--they're lowering standards which is not good for our children. I personally know of people whose children have taken courses in high school that they did not get credit for because there was not a certified teacher taking that class--they took a class for a year and then it didn't count. That is not okay. My children are young and my husband's a firefighter and we are vested here-- I can't just get up and leave and go somewhere else with my family-- it would not be financially feasible so I'm just here standing for better benefits that were promised to us--it's not something that we're trying to make up now-- it's been a long time coming that they've needed to fund this. Pay is terrible. And we just want better for our kids.

Rondia Smith, 4th grade teacher at Cross Lanes Elementary (permission to use name w/ quote granted)

My name's Rondia Smith, I'm at Cross Lanes Elementary as well, I teach 4th grade and I'm here for the same reason she is to support a pay raise and to fully fund PEIA. And also I've been here every day, I'm gonna come here every day for the teachers that are in, that are far away in the northern panhandle, the eastern panhandle. I wanna be here because I know some of them would like to be here and can't so I'm gonna be their voice.

Erin Bush, Sutton Elementary School Teacher (permission to use name w/ quote granted)

EB: I'm Erin Bush, I'm at Sutton Elementary School in Braxton County.

EH: And why are you here today?

EB: Really just support for all this. I mean initially it was our premiums going up, and I already work a second job to pay for things and then I found out that was basically gonna get cancelled out when they started looking at my second job, so I already work pretty hard to stay above the water and started looking like we were gonna drown, I guess.

Cathy Kunkel: How long do you think you'll be out here-- any idea?

EB: If I had to like put money on it I'd say till next week sometime. I mean it's definitely been brought up, a solution has been brought up, but they keep pushing it aside--they don't want to talk about it. It seems like if they want us in the classrooms they would at least entertain the idea of talking about it. But they keep pushing it aside. And I also feel like if there was no solution like they keep saying there is, then why do we have all this legislative support that we do have out here with us, so...

CK: What's the solution you're referring to?

EB: The big energy corporations, I mean taxing the oil that's kinda lining their pockets right now. Giving it to the people instead of the corporation.

EH: Anything else you wanna add?

EB: Oh no, just stay strong!

Jay O'Neal, Stonewall Jackson Middle School Teacher (See below re: permission)

EH: Could you tell me your name, county, and school?

JO: Sure, Jay O'Neal, Kanawha County, Stonewall Jackson Middle School.

EH: Why are you out here today?

JO: I just want to be part of this. I want to send a message to our legislators and our governor that enough is enough so I'm here to be here like physically occupying space and just showing them, hey, we haven't forgotten and we're gonna be here as long as it takes.

CK: How do these issues affect you?

JO: I'll give you an example-- last year, not this school year but last year, I opened up my paycheck in the fall, you know normally expecting it to be slightly higher than the year before, and it was actually less because I got bumped up into another PEIA bracket, and I remember just thinking--this is crazy, like who does this job where they're actually making less money every year, right? You know, and our salary steps don't keep up with inflation and with the cuts every year, it's maddening, you just think, I cannot keep doing this and literally be making less money.

Version edited by Jay O'Neal for written publication

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Kim Jones, South Side Elementary Teacher (photo--Patti Smith sign) (contacted via email)

EH: Can you tell me your name, county and school?

KJ: Yeah, Kim Jones, Cabell County, South Side Elementary

EH: Why are you out here today?

KJ: I'm out here because it's been a long time. It's been a really long time and people have been suffering for a long time and not able to meet their own needs and you know, it's hard to go into a school and try to take care of children and meet all of their needs, especially in this climate. I mean you wouldn't believe the things that we see in the schools, I mean it's tragic--the conditions that poverty has caused, the drug epidemic, and but we have just been going so long without getting a raise that will meet a sustainable raise, a sustainable wage and it's just been going on too long--that's what it is, we've just been deprived for so long and living in subsistence for so long-- if we're lucky we're living in subsistence. So... that's kind of why, it just kinda built up.

EH: You were talking about being excited that UMWA guys were out--could you talk a little bit about that?

KJ: Yeah! It was very exciting. Yesterday I wasn't here for the rally but it was really thrilling to see those guys come out! They know how to do it. You know? My mom was an organizer for the AFT, you know, years ago, 70s and the 80s, but people my age really don't know how to do that, you know? And it's very cool to have the people that do know how to have the demonstrations, to fund the demonstrations-- like Bud [UMWA member] was talking about a strike fund if it would go that long-- I mean these are the folks that know how to do it, and we need people to teach us how to be effective.

Butch Herndon, UMWA Local 750

BH: My name's Butch Herndon, my local's 750, United Mine Workers. And I live in St. Albans, West Virginia.

EH: Why are you out here today?

BH: To support these union brothers and sisters.

EH: And how do you see this strike progressing compared to what you've...

BH: I believe if they hold out and stick together, they'll eventually get what they want. They're close to it.

CK: Have you been a part of UMWA or other strikes in the past?

BH: Yeah, I've been to Washington for rallies, I've been to Lexington, Kentucky, and I stood on the picket line in Hughes Creek in Eastern Kanawha County for seven months in 2004 up into 2005. That was for benefits and retirement and all.

Angela, Kanawha County Teacher

A: I'm Angela and I teach in Kanawha County.

EH: Could you tell us why you're out here today?

A: I'm out here because I'm fighting for good quality teachers to stay in West Virginia. I'm a transplant and the... (tears up) the majority of people that came down here with me, all of them are gone, actually-- I'm the only one.

EH: Are you from Ohio?

A: I'm from New York.

EH: Why did they all leave?

A: They all came and got their experience right out of college and then they went home to jobs that pay substantially better-- like 15,000 dollars more a year, so...

EH: What has kept you here?

A: I met a nice man (laughs) and he is dying to move but I really like being close to one of our families, so... and he won't move to New York.

Laura, Kanawha County

L: My name's Laura and I'm in Kanawha County. I'm not in any specific school.

EH: Why are you out here today?

L: Well several reasons-- one is PEIA of course. The increase that is being suggested is 3x as much as what we're paying now, and understandably we're number 48th in the country in pay, so if we're paying that much more in PEIA for insurance, we obviously can't make a living with those kind of wages. So they're both, they're both synonymous, you know, together as far as with the salaries, we're again 48th in the country so it's only right for us to be paid as professionals.

EH: Do you have other questions?

CK: Any idea how long you'll be out here?

L: Right now we are 55 strong so hopefully when the times get scary is when they're gonna open the schools back up and that's when people's paychecks will be affected so hopefully we can stay strong and in 1990, they stayed out for 11 days and they didn't have the support that we seem to be having right now so hopefully we can go as long as they did and longer if we have to.

Pam Hornbeck, Teacher at Hamilton Middle School (contacted via FB)

EH: Could you tell me your name, county, and school?

PH: Pam Hornbeck, Wood County, Hamilton Middle School.

EH: Why are you out here today?

PH: I'm tired of not getting a raise and PEIA goes up every year and it just makes it more difficult to afford to be able to even go to the doctor or get my prescriptions or anything. So it's really just unbelievable. Instead of my pay going up it's going down.

EH: How long have you been in schools?

PH: 19 years. So I've got some time in there. Not as much as others, but I've got some time in there.

Katrina Kirk, Sherman Elementary Teacher, Boone County (Permission to use name w/ quote granted)

My name's Katrina Kirk, I teach in Boone County at Sherman Elementary School.

EH: What grade do you teach?

KK: I'm a special education teacher, so I'm a mix of 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 5th graders in my classroom.

EH: Why are you out here today?

KK: I'm out here to support myself, my fellow teachers, my husband is a teacher also so it affects my entire household. I want them to find the funding source--well they don't need to find it, they just need to put it in place-- to fix our insurance and PEIA. It's not necessarily about a pay raise, if they would fix our insurance than we wouldn't need a pay raise.

CK: So what's the funding source you think they should put in place for PEIA?

KK: I believe that they could fund the natural gas that's coming out of our state. It's ours so we need to use that to support the people that work--the working class citizens of our state.

Sherman Elementary teacher, Boone County

EH: Would you mind telling us your county and school?

Teacher: Boone County, Sherman Elementary.

EH: And why are you out here today?

T: Because we need highly qualified teachers in the classroom. I don't feel that the legislature or our governor has our best interest at heart right now. So it's time for the teachers to take a stand and make a change.

EH: Anything else to add?

T: I hope they come to a solution quickly.

Whitesville Elementary Teacher, Boone County

EH: Could you tell me your name, county and school?

T: Boone County, Whitesville Elementary

EH: And why are you out here today?

T: I'm here to support the idea that they need to fund PEIA as well as--if they could just fund PEIA then we wouldn't even need a raise 'cause there's some people that just having, not having that insurance pay enough would bump their income, their household income so there's no need to give us a pay raise if they would just fund PEIA. And I understand that's kinda hard to figure out, but I know that there is a way if they would just look through all the means.

And in regards to certified teachers, I went through 4 years of education and that was... fun (laughs) and it taught you a lot about how to deal with kids and students with special needs that-- not just in the special education classroom, but just in general- they don't all learn the same. And my first year, which is now, stepping into the classroom, I'm terrified, and I feel like I know NOTHING but yet again, I've been trained for 4 years so I couldn't imagine one who's never been trained going into the classroom with students. Like I have all the book smarts and the terminology for everything but when you come face to face with a student who really just doesn't understand it, to be able to grasp that knowledge and how you're able to teach the content in a way they can understand it, that's something that takes years of experience and being taught in educational philosophy and everything so I don't think it's... I don't know, I don't think it's the best thing to have teachers that are not, or people in the public coming into the classrooms that don't know how to teach, teach now. Could they get on some sort of trained program like a permit almost? That'd be--that'd be better than just letting them come in the classroom, so...