Tacoma teachers defy court order, vote overwhelmingly to continue strike

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Defying a court order issued on Wednesday to end their strike, teachers in Tacoma, Washington stayed out of class on Thursday and returned to the picket lines. At a meeting Thursday afternoon attended by 1,585 teachers, 1,478 voted to continue the strike.

On Monday night, teachers in the third-largest school district in Washington State voted to strike by a margin of 87 percent. The Tacoma Education Association (TEA) members began their pickets at 6 a.m. the next morning.

The teachers have been working without a contract since September 1. Negotiations between the TEA and the district have been ongoing since May 31, and an August strike vote was narrowly defeated.

In the wake of Monday's vote, the school district immediately sought a court injunction to end the strike, filing a lawsuit that had been drawn up in advance. In 2006, a state attorney general's opinion stated that state public employees, including teachers, had no right to strike. Nineteen previous teachers' strikes had been ruled illegal and the teachers ordered back into the classrooms.

"Our hope is the district will see we're together," math teacher Patricia Leo explained to the *News Tribune* after Thursday's re-vote. "I believe something good can come from this chaos. In my head, every once in awhile, I worry 'Oh, they'll fire us all.' But I want to stay positive."

The TEA has argued that while the union was forbidden from striking, the individual teachers were not and only union officials were prohibited from the picketing. On Wednesday Superior Court Judge Bryan Chushcoff rejected the argument, and issued a temporary restraining order demanding the teachers to return to work, and the TEA and district back into negotiations "as soon as practical." A hearing on an injunction to permanently end the strike has been scheduled for September 27.

The teachers returned to the picket lines in defiance of the order. A meeting was planned to take place at 1:30 (PST) Thursday, where negotiations between the district's bargainers and TEA would continue with a state mediator in attendance.

Concurrent with that meeting, however, was a mass meeting of teachers where the re-vote confirming the strike was taken. Many teachers expressed a militant mood.

Christine Wray, a kindergarten teacher at Whitman Elementary, told Seattle's KIRO, "I don't care. Injunction or not, I'm not going back until this is settled." She said this is the worst strike situation she has seen in her 41 years of teaching, and said of the district, "They are treating us like criminals, like we don't know what we're doing."

Ken Klinger, a First Creek Middle School science teacher, told the Associated Press that morale among the teachers was "wonderful… We're standing up for our rights. This is America."

Public education has been under attack in the state for years, with the Democratic Party leading the charge. Since 2009, the administration of Democratic Governor Christine Gregoire has slashed more than $800 million from K-12 schools, pre-school and after-school programs. Cuts to such services are particularly painful for urban, working class districts such as Tacoma.

In June, the Democratic-controlled legislature passed more deep cuts to public education funds for the 2011-2012 fiscal years. Among the new reductions is a cut to teachers' pay of 1.9 percent.

The state has left implementation of these pay cuts to school districts. Teachers in the Tacoma School District have been given the option of sacrificing a personal day

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and a school-wide training day, or taking a 1.35 percent reduction in the pay schedule by accepting two-and-a-half furlough days.

Section 85 of the expired contract, which allows the involuntary reassignment of teachers at the whim of the district, is a noted sticking point in negotiations. The district wants to scrap employee seniority in what they call an effort to assure a "better fit" when assigning teachers to schools.

As of the start of the current school year, 136 Tacoma district teachers had been displaced as a result of two schools closing and compliance with federal grant requirements. Three have yet to be reassigned.

Though the issue is being posed as one of seniority versus performance, it is part of a larger drive in Washington and other states to compete for Race To The Top funds—with the ability to reassign teachers regardless of degrees, training or seniority in an attempt to secure funds for schools not meeting the ever-changing benchmarks. At a certain point, the competition requires letting go of the principal or up to half of the teachers in an "offending" school. If the rules of seniority are not in effect, the more experienced—and higher-paid—teachers can more easily be let go.

TEA officials are scheduled to meet with district heads on Friday to consider a new proposal on wage cuts, according to a posting on the union's web site. The TEA has not made public the details of its latest offer.

It is of note that the TEA is not even pressing for teacher wage increases, even those normally associated with the rise in the cost-of-living. In fact, over the past decade, teachers have been subjected to repeated wage freezes, even as both the cost of living and their individual workloads have grown.

Teachers are increasingly compelled to purchase supplies for their students and classrooms out-of-pocket with no reimbursement. As the economy worsens in Tacoma and across the state, meeting the needs of students from struggling homes becomes a rising financial burden on teachers.

The union has also offered to keep the maximum class size language as is, though the district's teachers have among the highest class sizes in the country and have asked for a reduction by one student per class.

The recent closure of two Tacoma elementary schools meant the redistribution of students into the surviving schools, raising the numbers per classroom. The district claims that reducing class sizes by even one student per class would cost upwards of $1.8 million since some 30 teachers would need to be hired. The district has reserve funds that would cover that amount.

Even on what the TEA describes as the most explosive sticking point, that of seniority, the union has taken pains to insist that it is flexible to changing the way teachers are assigned in the system. Such contortions leave the rank-and-file vulnerable to drastic restructuring and "charterizing" of the day-to-day management of schools and their employees.

In contrast, the city's working class has rallied behind the teachers. Passersby honk in support of strikers outside the schools and students have joined in the picket lines. The Associated Press reported that during Thursday's re-vote, hundreds of students appeared to rally in solidarity. "I think it's a good example to show," Foss High School senior Rebecca Jimenez said of the vote. "If you're going to do something, stick with it. Don't give up."

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