

Tacoma, Washington teachers union pushes through concessions

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By a margin of 98 percent, teachers in Tacoma, Washington voted Thursday to approve a tentative agreement made by the union bargaining team under the watchful eye of Democratic Governor Christine Gregoire.

The contract agreement addressed none of the rank-and-file Tacoma Education Association (TEA) members' concerns, and amounts to a sell-out of all their demands.

Teachers in the Tacoma School District started their strike against the school district on September 13. Reflecting the militant mood of the teachers and the broad popular support they won from students and the public, the strike was carried out in defiance of a court order issued September 14 by Pierce County Superior Court Judge Bryan Chuschcoff. The order demanded teachers return to work and the union return to the negotiating table with the district. (See, "Tacoma teachers defy court order, vote overwhelmingly to continue strike")

Chuschcoff ordered contempt of court notices to be sent to the teachers when they returned to the picket lines. A hearing date had been set for September 27 to determine what penalties the 1,900 striking teachers would face.

On Monday, the judge announced he was considering authorizing the Tacoma School District to hire replacement teachers for the striking teachers. This threat was issued even as negotiations had resumed between the TEA and the school district.

A representative for the TEA said merely that he doubted such a high number of teachers could even be found, and an attorney for the union asserted that the judge does not have the authority to make such a ruling.

The legal threat is in keeping with recent assaults on the right to strike, such as the lawsuit launched by the

National Labor Relations Board against the ILWU dockworkers in Longview, Washington to stop them from picketing, and the interventions at the local and national levels against the striking Verizon workers.

On Wednesday, Washington Governor Christine Gregoire, a Democrat, ordered the representatives for the union and the district to report to her office for closed-door negotiations. Talks had broken down when negotiators for the school board walked out at 11pm Tuesday night.

The two sides were scheduled to meet on Wednesday afternoon in the governor's office, but the negotiations continued until approximately 10pm, at which time it was announced that a tentative agreement had been drawn up to be presented to the teachers on Thursday. Teachers were instructed not to return to their strike posts or to work, and a vote was planned for noon at Mount Tahoma High School.

Union spokesman Rich Wood told reporters for CNN, "There's a tentative agreement, which we will now vote on. All of the big issues, class size, teacher pay and transfers, we were able to agree on." In line with a long series of concessions by the TEA, such "agreements" are once again to the detriment of the teachers and the advantage of the school district.

The contract—details of which have yet to be released at the time of this writing—contains language keeping class sizes at their current levels despite the district's having the third-most crowded classrooms in the state. Washington as a whole has among the highest student-teacher ratios in the country.

The striking teachers had asked that class sizes be reduced by just one student per class. The TEA conceded this point to the district. Teachers' salaries will also stay the same, regardless of rising living costs. Teachers have received no increases in the last three

years, and have taken a 1.9 percent pay cut under the current state budget.

Asked if she thought the cuts had led to the strike, Governor Gregoire trotted out tired phrases about having to make “hard funding choices,” and noted that she would be saying more on the subject when she called a special session of the legislature in late November at which education would be “back on the table” due to further projected revenue shortfalls.

On the subject of Section 85 of the old contract, which governs teacher reassignment, the union and the district agreed to form a committee to develop a “fair” policy. The union leadership blithely declared of the agreement that it “gave us what we’ve been asking for.”

In fact, the arrangement leaves the most contentious issue in the strike unsettled. The district had pushed for control over teacher placement, bypassing seniority rights. The overriding of seniority is part of a broader effort to push out older, more experienced teachers and replace them with a young, more poorly paid workforce.

Even before the tentative agreement had been reached, Judge Chuschcoff exerted pressure on the teachers to vote in favor of whatever was offered when he said that any further litigation against them for defying the court order to return to work could be avoided by doing so.

As the Tacoma teachers were voting on the concessions agreement, the governor called a press conference to announce the starting date of the special 30-day legislative session. “There will be more cuts that will affect our vulnerable citizens,” Governor Gregoire said. “There will be more cuts in our corrections system. There will be more cuts in our public schools, colleges and universities. It is simply unavoidable.”

“The last thing we ought to be doing is cutting teacher salaries,” the governor lamented. “We shouldn’t be cutting education at all. Of course I have pangs of guilt. I don’t have any options.” Such pangs mean little to the teachers involved or their students, who have seen school budgets repeatedly slashed under her leadership.

Gregoire’s words ring particularly hollow in light of her recent proposals to consolidate all education offices—from kindergarten through the university

level—under one appointed superintendent and to allow the state universities a virtual carte blanche to raise tuitions without having to gain approval from the state legislature.

At the same time, notwithstanding the claim that the Democratic-dominated state government has no choice but to cut critical social programs, no one from among the Democratic Party or union leadership has suggested raising taxes on the state’s wealthy.

Washington is home to 10 billionaires, including Microsoft’s Bill Gates, Paul Allen, and Steve Ballmer, collectively worth at least \$83.5 billion. A five percent tax on these three personal fortunes would cover the shortfall projected over the next two years. Over 220,000 other individuals worth at least \$1 million live in the state.

“In Washington state, we have what’s known as the most regressive tax system in the country—it’s pretty broadly recognized to be such,” Economic Opportunity Institute Director Marilyn Watkins commented to the *Washington News Service* August 19. “That means the lowest-income individuals are paying the most—and the very wealthiest people in our state are paying the very least—in state and local taxes.”

Under these conditions, the state Democratic Party, like its national counterpart, has overseen unprecedented attacks on public education, health care and other social services. The Gregoire administration cut funding for already overstretched K-12 education, pre-school, and after-school programs by \$800 million in 2009-2011.

These attacks have been met with no opposition from the Washington Education Association, parent organization of the TEA, which consistently backs the Democratic Party in its election campaigns.



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