Tacoma, Washington teachers strike

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Public school teachers in Tacoma, Washington voted overwhelmingly to take strike action after months of stalled contract negotiations between the union and the city district. Teachers have been working without a contract since September 1.

More than 1,620 rank-and-file Tacoma Education Association members voted to strike at a meeting Monday night, a margin of nine-to-one in favor.

Classes were cancelled Tuesday for Tacoma's 28,800 students. Teachers picketed at the city's five high schools, starting at 6 a.m. outside Lincoln High School.

A strike vote late last month failed to pass by a margin of only 28 votes; in the re-vote, members with after-school responsibilities were allowed to participate, bringing the approval rate far higher than the 80 percent required by the TEA.

Primarily at issue is a district proposal to change contract language governing teacher transfers and reassignments. The language change would give the school board authority over teacher placements. This would facilitate efforts of the administration to push out older teachers with seniority, amounting to age discrimination. Older teachers are being targeted because of their better wages and often higher health care costs.

The district has also presented teachers with two pay-cut choices: sacrifice pay for a personal day and two training days, or take a 1.35 percent reduction in pay and take two-and-a-half furlough days.

The TEA has said it wants Tacoma class sizes to be decreased, but the school board insists that reducing classes even by one student would cost the district $1.8 million a year because it would have to hire 30 additional teachers. Washington has the third-most-crowded classrooms of any state in the country.

As Monday's vote was tallied, the Tacoma School Board met in an executive session to formulate a way to halt the strike. The board voted unanimously to deny striking teachers access to school grounds for "unlawfully withholding their services from the district."

The board delegated authority to District Superintendent Art Jarvis. The school board unanimously agreed to grant Jarvis the ability to approve contracts and make staffing decisions unilaterally.

Jarvis has immediately sought to have the work stoppage blocked through a court injunction and a declaration of its illegality. The school board passed a resolution stating the strike is "unlawful and will irreparably harm and disrupt the education program of the district." Washington's attorney general and state courts have ruled that state public employees do not have the right to strike.

Like districts across the state, Tacoma has attempted to deal with sharp state-level cuts in public education with an attack on teacher pay and conditions by increasing class sizes. Tacoma also has come under pressure to meet the state's "uniform bar standard," which ties funding to standardized test scores, graduation rates, and attendance.

In June, the Democratic-controlled state legislature passed a budget cutting funding for teachers' pay by 1.9 percent, although it left implementation of the cuts to school districts.

Democratic Governor Christine Gregoire has cut billions of dollars from education, health care, and other basic services over the past few years. Funding for K-12 education, pre-school, and after-school programs suffered cuts of more than $800 million in 2009-2011, and teachers have been subjected to repeated wage freezes in the last decade.

Under the new budget, most teachers and other state employees will be paid less over the next two years than in years past, many retired state workers will see their benefits frozen, and public workers will be

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required to pay more into health care.

Parents and workers in Tacoma have shown solidarity with the picketing teachers. “I got so many texts from parents asking ‘how can we support you?’” Lincoln High School history teacher Nathan Boling told the *News Tribune*. The paper noted that passing drivers were honking in support.

In contrast, the Washington Education Association, the parent organization of the TEA, has offered no real defense against these attacks on workers they purport to represent. In fact, the unions have repeatedly endorsed the very Democratic Party politicians who have led the way in attacking public education.

For its part, the TEA has repeatedly stressed its willingness to “sacrifice,” including foregoing wage raises for its rank-and-file and insisting on the issue of teacher placement that it was “open to changing the way teachers are assigned, but any system must be fair, objective, measurable and consistent.”

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