

Teachers, school staff continue strike in Cleveland, Ohio suburb

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Teachers are entering the third week on strike in Strongsville, Ohio, a more affluent suburb outside of Cleveland, as a federal mediator held talks Sunday, the first since the strike began March 4. The talks began as the school district continued hiring replacement workers and two strikers were arrested on the picket line.

The old contract for 383 teachers and other educational staff expired last June at the same time Republican governor John Kasich signed House Bill 153, the state budget for the next two fiscal years. The final version of the bill cut close to \$3 billion in funding for public education, and called for a sharp expansion of charter schools and voucher programs. Post-secondary education was cut by \$440 million.

The gutting of seniority rights and pensions, while not included in HB 153, are part of the demands of the Strongsville Board of Education. By getting rid of seniority in favor of so-called “pay for performance,” or “value added measures,” the district can get rid of the most experienced and highest paid teachers. Teachers would be fired based on evaluations, with 50 percent of the evaluation based on student test scores.

This aligns with one of the central tenets of the Obama Administrations attack on public education, the Race to the Top program, which seeks to eliminate teacher tenure. By tying federal funding to performance on standardized tests, charter school permits, and cost-cutting—such as the eradication of pension plans—the Obama administration and its state-level counterparts have compelled local school districts to carry out an all-out assault on the living standards of teachers, leading to a decline in the quality of classroom instruction.

The stand taken by striking teachers has won support from current and prior students and parents, as shown at a vigil last Thursday in Strongsville where 150 people

came together to support the teachers. Several children held signs reading, “I love my teachers.”

The SEA has repeatedly gone out of its way to stress its readiness to negotiate an end to the walkout. According to the Northeast Ohio *Sun News*, Strongsville Education Association President Tracy Linscott said, “the board members showing up to the negotiating session was a deal maker to reaching an agreement.”

Since there was no progress reached in either of the two “exploratory meetings,” *Sun News* reported, “the SEA invited the board members to a March 16 negotiation session at the North Eastern Ohio Education Association offices in Garfield Heights”. The school board refused and stated they were only willing to attend a meeting called by a mediator. The meeting held Sunday is in response to the board’s request.

This comes on the heels of the arrest of two teachers on the picket line allegedly for blocking strikebreakers from entering school buildings. The district has been hiring about 20 new replacement workers every day through Huffmaster, a notorious strikebreaking firm contracted by the district months before the contract ended on March 8.

The *Northeast Sun News* reported one teacher was released after being cited with one count of “reckless operation of a motor vehicle”. The other was charged with disorderly conduct, after being identified by the police the day before as a militant and outspoken striker.

A comment by a *Sun News* reader eight months ago noted that the district paid over half a million dollars to Pepple and Waggoner, “a law firm that has built a reputation around being antagonistic during labor negotiations, claiming it will help school boards ‘take

back' their school from unions." The reader concluded that the district was determined to provoke a strike.

In the face of this assault, the Strongsville teachers have been left isolated by the Ohio Education Association and National Education Association (NEA), the parent organizations of the SEA. The NEA was one of the first unions to endorse Obama's reelection, levying \$10 from each of its 3.2 million members to provide the president with a \$32 million infusion.



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