

Striking teachers, students and parents rally to defend education in Cleveland area

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Teachers, parents and students in Strongsville, Ohio held a rally last Thursday as instructors concluded the third week of their strike. The federal mediator called for negotiations for this Tuesday, March 26, as the school board remains intransigent, even after Strongsville Education Association (SEA) offered an additional \$300,000 in concessions.

Nearly 400 teachers and staff have been on strike since March 4 against the Strongsville School District, which by all appearances is seeking to break the strike and replace the teachers. After demanding \$2 million in concessions from the teachers, the school board spent over half a million dollars to hire an anti-union lawyer and the notorious strikebreaking firm Huffmasters. From the first day of the strike, Huffmasters has staffed the schools with strikebreakers.

The fact that this is occurring in a more affluent area of northeastern Ohio, in a school district rated “distinguished” with some of the highest test scores in the country, makes it clear that this is part of the overall attack on public education being spearheaded by the Obama administration.

The web site of the local economic development department says, “The Strongsville School District is one of the area’s elite school systems; receiving an “excellent” academic rating from the state in the past 6 years; student college admission test scores above State and National averages; 62% of graduates attending a four-year college; 26% attending a specialized post secondary school or two year college; 65% of the district’s faculty having a masters degree or higher; a diverse curriculum, encompassing a general & special needs, gifted, advanced placement and honors courses, as well as a strong array of extracurricular and sports programs.”

According to the US Census the median income in Strongsville in 2011 was \$77,087, with the median in the state of Ohio at \$48,071. In nearby Cleveland, the official

jobless rate is 17.8 percent, and the poverty level 26 percent. After a decade of pro-business school “reforms,” more than a quarter of Cleveland’s students are in for-profit charters.

Despite the clear social differences, teachers in both areas are facing a coordinated assault on the right to a decent standard of living and students, the right to a high-quality public education.

This was the major theme stressed by striking teachers and their supporters at the rally. Andy Bruening, a high school Physics and biotechnology teacher who has worked in the district for seven years, told the WSWS, “I am here to support public education in this strike. I think this is an attack on public education. They want to create an example out of us. They want to get something for nothing. Everybody moves to Strongsville because of the good schools, but you don’t get good schools for nothing.

“My wife questioned why I am on strike, and it is not just because of my family but for the whole community to have good education. Every child should have the right to go to good schools. I hate when I hear politicians say that education needs to be run like a business. In a business if you have a broken part you can throw it away. When a kid comes to us with problems, we have to fix them.

“I love my job and am good at my job, but I tell students who say they want to be teachers to be sure that they want a career where they are beat up all the time by the politicians and the media. Everything that is wrong is blamed on the teachers. Their aim is to destroy public education.

Samantha Hartsough and Alexander Reno, two high school seniors, came to the vigil to show their support. Samantha said, “I want to show that I support my teachers. They are the ones who worked hard to get me ready for college and life. Without them I would not know the things I do. I want them to come back with a fair contract. I plan on furthering my education and going to

college, and I realize that I need good teachers for that.”

Alexander explained, “I have noticed a trend towards ‘no taxes.’ But this means no public education. My family lived in Germany for a while, and when we moved back my parents could have lived anywhere in northeastern Ohio, but they chose Strongsville because of the great schools; now the school board doesn’t want to pay for it. I feel that all the students’ education is at stake.”

The husband of a teacher said, “I educated myself first about the issues, and I believe that the teachers are right. You don’t bargain in this way. The school board does not want to reach a settlement. They want to break the union; they don’t care what the teachers want and need. They don’t care about the students. My whole family is behind my wife; my kids are behind her; this is something worth fighting for.”

The mother of a student who has special needs said that she is supporting the strikers “because these are the people that care about my kids. My daughter has an IEP, (Individual Education Plan). I have called the school board up over and over to ask them how they are going to treat her, and they will not tell me anything. They sent my son and his friend to the principal’s office for his behavior—he was not able to understand the instructions—and the principal apologized to me and my son because the replacement had no idea about the IEP. In fact, when he asked her about it, she said, ‘What’s an IEP?’”

“My son in high school said that they are not even taking regular attendance. On the rare occasion that they do, the students just check in and leave the building. I know they are lying about the attendance; I see the school bus and only one kid is getting off in the afternoon. How can they say they have 90 percent attendance? This is not about money, if it was they could have settled this right away. They want to break the union and get rid of the teachers that we have.”

Louise, a teacher who has been working for 35 years, told the WSWS, “Before the strike my husband looked up a graph that showed the distribution of wealth in the United States. He said, ‘Why aren’t people upset about this?’ They don’t recognize the oppression. The people who don’t see the oppression are burying their heads in the sand. They are not looking at the truth. Now it’s the teachers, but it will be someone else if we don’t stand up for what’s right.”

Mr. and Mrs. Shaver told the WSWS that the students “started the Thursday night rallies because they were

basically told that they were to ‘be seen and not heard.’ The subs are not following our children’s IEPs. When we called the district they said that there is nothing that they can do about the subs. I have a third grader that cries everyday because he wants his teacher back, she understands him.”

Four high school students also spoke to the WSWS. When asked if there teachers were replaceable, there was a resounding “NO!” Katie explained, “They care about us, and want to help us. The material isn’t being taught in our classes. We want our teachers back. This is tearing our community apart.”

One resident who does not have any children, but wanted to support the teachers and public education, said, “I came out to support the strikers because this is an attack on public education, an attack on the working class. They want to set up a two-tier system here just like in auto and other industries.”

Of the five board members—David Frazee, Ruth Brickley, Richard Micko, Carl Naso, Jennifer Sinisgalli—all but Sinisgalli are Republicans, apparently associated with the right-wing Tea Party. They have insisted that the teachers surrender to their “last, best offer” to cover the city’s \$2 million debt.

Behind this intransigence is their sense that there is an opening now to destroy the conditions of teachers and sharply reduce their living standards. They are taking the lead from the Obama administration and Ohio’s Republican governor John Kasich.

In the face of this attack, the strike by Strongsville teachers has been isolated by the local union’s parent organization, the National Education Association, which is closely aligned with the Obama administration and is seeking to be a partner in its dismantling of public education.

This isolation must be broken and the courageous stand by the Strongsville teachers given the support of teachers and workers throughout Ohio and the country.



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