

Portland, Oregon teachers face unprecedented attack on jobs, work rights

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Portland teachers are in the midst of negotiations for a new contract with the Portland School board that includes unprecedented and far-reaching concession demands.

The board has taken an intransigent position since negotiations began in April, with the 71 of the 75 originally demanded concessions still on the table. The contract, which covers over 3,000 teachers, is set to expire at the end of this month.

In addition to describing management's rights as "without limitation," the proposed four-year contract would institute a wage freeze, require teachers to absorb all yearly health care increases and work an extra half hour daily with no increase in pay. The board has offered a one percent cost-of-living increase for each of the four years, which would represent an actual wage cut after inflation.

The board is demanding unlimited class size and unlimited teacher caseload. It also calls for a teacher's evaluation to be determined by student test scores, a particularly onerous demand given that nearly half of the students are economically disadvantaged (46 percent receive free or reduced lunch).

The so-called "teacher evaluation" regimes linked to standardized test scores, which are being implemented around the country, have little rational relationship to a teacher's actual effectiveness or ability. Instead, these "teacher evaluations" serve as a pretext for the bullying and firing of teachers, as well as for the reduction of their pay and working conditions.

Portland teachers have made significant concessions in every contract for the last ten years. In 2003 they went from the third best paid teachers in the metro area to 14th. That year, the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) union agreed to teachers working two weeks with no pay in order to address a budget gap.

In "An open letter to the Portland community" released in January, the board wrote, "Our contract with teachers also must change. As school board members, we know first-hand that Portland's schools are full of inspiring, committed educators. Yet we know that our current contract contains too many barriers to student learning."

Among the "barriers" criticized by the board is seniority as the determining factor in layoffs. Defining this protection as a "bureaucratic roadblock," the board calls for weakening or eliminating a cornerstone of workers' defense for the longer-employed and, hence, better-paid workers. Seeking to promote divisions among teachers along lines of age and race, the board cites the inability to retain "minority and bi-lingual teachers" as the rationale for their opposition to seniority.

The board places the blame for the deteriorating educational system on teachers' rights to decent wages, working conditions and workplace protections, disparaging these rights as "too many barriers to student learning."

The real "barriers to student learning" are the relentless attacks by the ruling class on public education, including in Portland the deep and ongoing budget cuts carried out over two decades since Measure 5, the property tax limitation amendment passed in 1990.

State funding for Portland Public Schools (PPS), the largest school district in the state of Oregon, has declined over successive Democratic administrations and currently stands at 75 percent of the state's own funding benchmark. Overall funding for K-12 education statewide has declined from 45 percent of the general fund to 39 percent currently. Over a half-billion dollars has been slashed from education since 2009.

Democratic Governor Kitzhaber is proposing a budget that would leave PPS with a \$17 million shortfall next year.

The sequestration cuts implemented under President Obama will deprive PPS of over \$2.5 million in federal funds designated for programs serving higher needs segments of the student population: Special Education, Head Start, English as a Second Language and Title 1 students. Nationwide, over 300,000 teaching positions have been eliminated since 2008.

It is worth noting that all the members of the school board spearheading the sweeping attack on teachers' rights are members of the Democratic Party.

The response of PAT, like other official teachers' unions around the country, has been to cram down the cuts while preventing the emergence of any organized opposition among teachers. The PAT's appeals are directed to the very forces that are carrying out these attacks on teachers, including the Democratic Party. At a public rally called by the PAT, ostensibly to organize support among students, parents and workers, any discussion on politics was engaged only to direct teachers to lobbying the Democratic Party-dominated legislature.

In stark contrast to the severity of the attacks on students and teachers, the official PAT efforts to mobilize public support were weak and limited. The only notice of the rally was a posting to the PAT Facebook page. The small turnout of roughly 100 people at the rally consisted of many who orbit around the union apparatus and the Democratic Party.

In an interview with the *Oregonian*, Gwen Sullivan, president of the PAT, defended her contacts with the Chicago Teachers Union. Assuring the powers-that-be that the PAT had no intention of going on strike, she said that union "leaders were interested in the [Chicago] union's work with building common understanding with parents and the community."

At the rally, a member of the Socialist Equality Party spoke on the issues facing Portland teachers and the need for an independent political struggle against the Obama administration. Referring to the Chicago teachers' strike (see "Lessons of the Chicago teachers strike") he addressed the role of the Chicago Teachers Union in betraying that strike and allowing Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel to implement a mass closure of schools and deep concessions on the teachers. The

Chicago Teachers Union shut down the strike and forced through a concessions contract that met all of Mayor Emanuel's demands.

A supporter of Social Equality Educators (SEE), a rank-and-file organization associated with the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO), responded by agreeing that mass school closures will take place in Chicago and that the teachers union made concessions. But, the SEE supporter said, "unions will never win everything."

As in Chicago, where the union leadership includes a leading member of the ISO, the role of such groups is to provide excuses for the union's betrayals.

The WSWS spoke with several Portland teachers about the attacks on their pay and working conditions.

Elizabeth teaches sixth and seventh grade with 35 students in each class. She said, "Our profession is under attack, the teachers are becoming the scapegoats. People are looking at the social issues. All the board sees is the budget. I can't see anything improving at this rate."

Mary, a retired teacher, said, "They blame the teachers, but it's not their fault. What are they supposed to do?"

A teacher who asked not to be identified said, "We have to take the cuts, and class sizes in elementary is 33 kids. Workload keeps going up and up. This is the dark ages of education."



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