

Shaler, Pennsylvania teachers enter second week of strike against concessions

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Teachers and professional workers in Pennsylvania are in the second week of their strike against the Shaler School District demands for massive concessions in health care and a pay freeze for the first year of a proposed new contract.

The 390 teachers and professional workers have been working under a contract that expired over two years ago. The school board is demanding that teachers pay 15 percent of their health care premiums and accept a pay freeze the first year of the contract and pay increases of 3 to 3.5 percent in years two, three and four.

Teachers in the Shaler area are already paid about \$10,000 a year less than other teachers in Allegheny County. Out of 42 school districts in the county, Shaler teachers' average pay ranks seventh from the bottom. The district is resisting demands by teachers that their salaries be brought closer in line with other teachers in the county.

Over the past 15 years, the Shaler Area School District has replaced more than 300 longstanding teachers with lower-paid new-hires who start out at less than half the pay. As these younger teachers have worked their way up the pay scale, the district is again looking to cut costs.

Shaler, a small town bordering Pittsburgh, has about 4,700 students—down 1,000 students from 10 years ago.

The strikers have received strong support from students, parents and other workers in the community. Each morning, about 100 teachers mass picket at the district headquarters, which also houses the middle school.

School districts in Pennsylvania have been under very little pressure to negotiate with the unions since a law limiting teachers' strikes to only a few days a year was passed two decades ago. The law mandates teachers to

provide 180 days of classroom instruction by June 15 regardless of labor disputes.

Neither of the two teachers' unions, the Pennsylvania Federation of Teachers (PFT), nor the Pennsylvania Education Association (PEA) has opposed the law in any serious way. The Shaler teachers are represented by the Shaler Area Educational Association, part of the PEA, and will have to return to work no later than September 24 to be in compliance with the law.

Two other school districts in Pennsylvania have gone on strike this year—the Wyoming Area School District in Luzerne County in the north central region of the state, and Old Forge School District in Lackawanna County in the Wilkes-Barre-Scranton area.

Shaler, like all districts in Pennsylvania, has faced massive cuts in both state and federal funding. In the 2011-12 school year, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett cut over \$1 billion from K-12 school funding at the same time that federal stimulus funds were cut. Very little of that money has been restored, resulting in a cumulative \$3 billion in cuts for school districts across the state.

Since 2011, school districts have laid off over 20,000 teaching staff. This year, 75 percent of the state's 500 school districts are either laying off more teachers or not filling positions of teachers who have retired. In addition to laying off teachers, school districts throughout the state have increased class size, cut course offerings and eliminated art, music, and sports activities to make up the budget shortfalls.



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