

Portland school board threatens to break looming teachers strike

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Negotiations between Portland Public Schools (PPS) and the teachers' union have been ongoing for nearly the last seven months. Recently PPS has raised the possibility that they are actively preparing for a strike: notices have been sent out to multiple graduate schools in the area as well as a posting on its Facebook page that it is seeking to hire substitute teachers in nearly every subject, from language to math to arts.

While the Democratic Party-controlled school district denies it is recruiting strikebreakers, an undercurrent to the negotiations, noted by local media and union officials, has been the possibility of a strike due to the school board's adamant concession demands. And, while the district claims it is only recruiting to maintain an optimum pool of substitutes, it normally does not hire substitutes at this time of year, and teachers who have been on a substitute waiting list for the last two years suddenly find themselves receiving invitations to interview for jobs.

Mediated negotiations last week between PPS, the largest school district in Oregon with 48,000 students in 77 schools, and the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) concluded with no significant progress on a new contract.

Talks between the school board and the union will shortly enter their seventh month with only five of 28 contractual articles reportedly resolved so far. Drastic concession demands by the board have been the hallmark of the discussions. This is in line with a statement by board member Matt Morton that, "We need to be aggressive about this, and the business as usual is not something that has gotten us to a place that's going to be tolerable anymore."

The district's proposals would further erode wages with a significant increase in out-of-pocket health care costs, estimated to average \$11,000 over the next four

years. The board proposes to add two instructional days to the school year, however, with no increase in teaching staff. PPS also demands the removal of any limitation on class size, a demand that flatly contradicts its public assertion to pursue "academic excellence." Even the current contractually imposed limit of 180 students for high school teachers has contributed to the present situation where PPS Superintendent Carole Smith has stated that despite "achievements" all areas require improvement.

In the second and third mediated talks last week PPS slightly increased its cost-of-living rise from 4 percent over four years to 5 percent over three years, an amount that is still below the rate of inflation and, consequently, an effective wage cut. A fourth meeting with the state mediator is scheduled for December 5.

Since the beginning of the year PPS has orchestrated a public-relations campaign to depict the teachers' demands as greedy and "unrealistic." An open letter to all Portland residents last January denounced the present contract as containing "too many barriers to student learning." In this they have been assisted by the local media, in particular the *Oregonian* newspaper, which has conducted a vitriolic campaign on its editorial page against the teachers. Despite PAT's assurances and its history of never having gone on strike, in a provocative September 10 editorial entitled "Portland teacher negotiations may need mediation to prevent strike," the *Oregonian* states that the "district appears to be aiming for a defensible, sustainable teacher contract. It's not always clear if union leaders share that goal."

On cue the school board shortly after—noting that the minimum 150 days of talks required by state law had passed—invoked state mediation. The next stage, if 15 days of mediation proves fruitless, is then set for the

school board to declare an impasse and impose its proposed regressive contract. At that point teachers, librarians and counselors could either go out on strike or accept a concessions-laden contract. The 15-day deadline has not been invoked by PPS since it is concerned to maintain the fiction that it is engaging in good-faith negotiations with PAT.

With its aggressive demands, the Democratic Party in Portland is no doubt counting on the teachers' union to block any serious struggle. The PAT is affiliated to the National Education Association (NEA), one of the first unions to endorse Obama's reelection. Although the president has overseen the destruction of at least 330,000 teachers jobs, the shutdown of 4,000 schools and the doubling of the number of students enrolled in privately run charter schools, the Democratic administration has utilized the services of the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers to carry out its pro-corporate school "reform" agenda.

Portland school authorities are no doubt aware of the sellout of the Chicago teachers' strike last September by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU)—the largest teachers strike in years. Despite a determined opposition by 26,000 teachers with widespread public support from parents and students Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel—with the assistance of the CTU and its pseudo-left defenders in the International Socialist Organization (ISO)—achieved his aims.

After nine days on strike supposedly "left" CTU President Karen Lewis accepted the mayor's essential demands: the expansion of test-based evaluation systems, the extension of the school day without compensation, and the granting of broad authority to fire tenured teachers. Since then thousands of teachers and support staff have been fired, 50 schools have been closed and severe budget reductions have been implemented.

The chief concern of the CTU, however, was to prevent a political confrontation between the working class and the Democratic Party and Obama. The CTU, which is now seeking to extract more money from its members to support Democratic state legislators, is looking to this big business party to increase its dues-gathering operations at charter schools that have sprung up in Chicago.

In Portland, the strategy of the PAT, instead of preparing for a strike, has been to call on teachers to

lobby and petition the Democratic governor and Democratic-dominated legislature. As in Chicago, the union relies on the support of the pseudo-left ISO, which along with its front organization Social Equality Educators, provides a left cover for its betrayals of teachers.

Teachers must reject this and prepare new forms of organization, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, to unite the entire working class against the profit system and to attacks on public education.



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