

# Union moves to block Portland teachers strike, impose concessions

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With a December 27 deadline fast approaching, the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) is working feverishly to block a strike by 2,800 educators against unlimited class sizes, the expanded use of standardized tests, and wage and health care concessions.

After eight months of negotiations and mediation, school officials declared an impasse on November 20. That began a month-long state-mandated “cooling off” period, which ends Friday, after which the district could impose its demands unilaterally and the union could either accept it or call the first strike in the history of the Portland Public Schools.

The district has insisted it will not negotiate class sizes or back down on its concession demands. Officials have recruited teachers as potential strikebreakers and board member Matt Morton, declared, “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 has made the absurd claim that increased or unlimited class sizes are unrelated to workload and therefore are not an issue subject to bargaining under Oregon’s Collective Bargaining Act. Last year, a state mediator ruled that PPS had violated the teachers’ contract by increasing the student to teacher ratio above 180 to one.

The PAT has done nothing to prepare teachers for a genuine struggle. Instead, union executives have preached conciliation while bolstering illusions that appeals to the state labor relations board and publicity stunts will pressure the school board to modify its demands. In a further signal that it has no intention to call a strike, the PAT has agreed to several more bargaining sessions after the December 27 deadline, including on January 2 and 3, before another mediation session on January 6. The PAT has not said what it

would do if the district unilaterally imposed a contract on teachers.

“Every time we are able to come together with district leaders and share the experience, hopes and concerns of teachers working on the front-lines with students, we move closer to a settlement,” said Gwen Sullivan, teachers union president, in a press release. Sullivan and the union’s bargaining chair declared that they remained “hopeful” to reach an agreement and, departing from previous statements, made no mention of a possible strike.

According to the PAT’s Facebook page, the union has reached an agreement on 20 out of 51 issues. The union has conducted the negotiations behind the backs of teachers and refused to make public what issues remain, but according to press accounts, they are the most important, including class sizes, workloads, salary, health insurance, instructional time, and teacher transfers.

Oregon already has among the highest student-to-teacher ratios in the US, according to a state report released last week. The ratio reached historic highs of 22.6 students for every teacher compared to the national average of 16, meaning Oregon’s teachers instruct 35 percent more students. This number is different from class sizes because the calculation also includes times when teachers are preparing lessons away from their students or teaching smaller numbers of students, like special education classes. Class sizes of 30 to 35 are widely reported in Oregon’s middle and high schools.

The report also noted that since the 2007-2008 school year, Oregon’s total number of teachers dropped an astonishing nine percent, going from 31,658 teachers to 28,065 for the 2012-2013 year, despite a growth in population.

The PAT has routinely accepted major concessions on every contract. In 2003, Portland Public Schools (PPS) went from being the third highest paid in the state to the 14th highest paid overnight, with PAT agreeing to two weeks of unpaid work to address a budget gap issue. Teachers across the state of Oregon are fighting similar battles. Both Woodburn and Medford districts are in state-brokered mediation. Nine Oregon teachers unions and two classified employees' unions are in mediation with their districts.

Concurrent with teachers' negotiations, last month about 250 bus drivers, who provide transportation for 6,700 PPS students, voted to authorize a strike to oppose demands by First Student, the largest school bus company in America, to drop company-paid health care benefits for new hires. The last contract agreed to by the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757, which expired in June 2012, raised top pay to \$15.76 an hour after six years and increased workers' contribution to health costs to a 50 percent share.

Sean Murray, the school district's human resources representative, claims that Portland cannot hire more teachers and reduce class sizes while PAT continues to seek pay raises that outpace state funding increases. However, the *Oregonian* reported on November 21 that Carole Smith, PPS Superintendent, has stated that the district is finally feeling stable with a \$1 billion bump in state education funding and some \$18 million in the district's reserves.

While state and local politicians insist there is no money to improve teaching conditions, corporate profits and the stock market are hitting record highs. Phil Knight, the owner of Portland-based Nike athletic wear, and Microsoft executive and Portland Trailblazers professional basketball team owner Paul Allen are sitting on fortunes worth \$14.4 billion and \$15.8 billion respectively.

The PAT, like its parent organization, the National Educational Association, is thoroughly wedded to the Democratic Party, which dominates the school board, and the state and local government. The NEA was the first union to endorse the 2012 re-election of President Obama, who is spearheading the attack on public education.

The unions are not opposed to Obama's pro-corporate agenda, they only want to be partners in the process. In an effort to maintain its grip over rank-and-

file teachers, the PAT is enlisting the support for the Chicago Teachers Union and pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization (ISO) to conceal its betrayals behind all sorts of talk about "social justice unionism" and opposition to standardized testing.

These forces have sought to exploit the desire of Portland students to defend their teachers by promoting student walkouts and other protests, which are entirely subordinated to the behind-the-scenes maneuvering by the PAT executives with the school board and Democratic Party politicians.

The PAT and its pseudo-left supporters are following the pattern of Chicago Teachers Union, which combined phony rhetoric about "corporate enemies of public education" with the betrayal of the 2011 strike by 28,000 teachers against Obama's former White House chief of staff and current Chicago mayor, Rahm Emanuel. Opposing any struggle against the Democratic Party and the capitalist profit system it defends, the CTU called off the strike, accepted Emanuel's demands and gave the green light to the shutdown of 50 schools, the largest mass school closing in US history. In return, the union was given access to organize—and collect union dues from—hundreds of highly exploited charter school teachers.

The struggle to defend teachers and public education is above all a political struggle against the corporate and financial aristocracy, which controls economic and political life in America and throughout the world. To conduct such a struggle, educators need new organizations, which are independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions and Democratic Party. Above all, teachers and all those who defend the right to public education require a new socialist perspective and leadership, which the Socialist Equality Party alone is fighting for.



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