

Portland teachers to vote on strike

Katie Hughes and Hector Cordon
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The Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) has scheduled a strike authorization vote today after ten months of negotiations. Even after the union's decision last week to convene a vote, the PAT and district officials continued negotiating Friday, and have scheduled another session with a state mediator for Sunday, February 9.

If teachers vote in favor of strike the union would be “legally allowed” to give the district ten days notice of its intent to strike. A walkout would be the first in the history of the Portland Public School District (PPS), which is the largest district in the state with 2,900 teachers and 48,000 students.

While the union has rattled the strike option over the past few months—especially in response to the district calling an impasse last November—it has made no preparations for a serious struggle. Instead, union officials have continuously called for reconciliation, despite the district's refusal to budge on its demands for unlimited class sizes, the expanded use of standardized tests and wage and health care concessions. The district is also demanding that seniority not determine eligibility in bumping forward more junior employees.

The big business media has vilified teachers while the PPS has vowed to maintain normal class schedules even if teachers go on strike. District spokeswoman Christine Miles said the district has a “deep list” of substitute teachers to keep schools open.

PPS has been demanding the removal of the cap on the number of students teachers are required to instruct every semester, currently set at 180. Oregon already has among the highest student-teacher ratios of any US state—22.6 students for every teacher compared to a national average of 16.

Over the past 20 years the PAT has imposed one concession contract after another. It gave up ten days' pay in 2003 and cost of living increases in 2011, along

with accepting the school board's demand for delaying a step increase for six months. PAT leaders justified the givebacks with the claim that this would “save jobs” and “keep schools open,” none of which happened.

There is widespread determination among teachers for a fight. During the packed school board meeting on Tuesday, January 27 several teachers took to the podium to let the board know how they felt. Anticipating an overflow of anger on the part of parents and teachers, school officials had a contingent of police on hand in an attempt to intimidate opposition.

A history teacher from Madison High School said, “We want to be teaching our kids, but make no mistake. What we want even less is the continuing erosion of our working conditions and our students' learning conditions—and if it takes going on strike to get you to see that, we're ready to walk.” Superintendent Carole Smith was interrupted with comments like, “we have no leadership!” and “you're not in control!”

PAT President Gwen Sullivan told the press union leaders would have only called a strike vote if their internal polling showed a “very, very large majority” willing to vote “yes.” Afterwards she warned, “There's a lot of support out there and so we hope that the district will come back, let's negotiate this, and let's close this chapter of this negotiation.”

If union officials are incapable of containing this opposition, they may very well call a strike. In the hands of the PAT, however, such a walkout would be used to let off steam and wear teachers down, while union executives negotiated behind the backs of teachers to push through the concessions.

PAT and the other unions are opposed to any political confrontation with the Democratic Party, with which they enjoy the closest relations and share a similar pro-corporate outlook. However, it is precisely the Democratic Party—which dominates Oregon at the state, local and school district level—that is spearheading the

attack on public education.

Policies being pursued by the district, such as test-based evaluations and the opening of charter schools, are key points in President Obama's reactionary Race To The Top education program. The PAT and its parent organization, the National Education Association—which was the first union to endorse Obama's 2012 reelection campaign—are not opposed to Obama's pro-business "school reform" agenda, they only want to be accepted as full partners in implementing it.

The union tells teachers their only option is to appeal to Democrats—the very same politicians who claim there is "no money" for education while the state legislature hands massive tax breaks to Fortune 500 companies like Nike and Intel that have starved the public schools.

The effort to contain the opposition of teachers within the confines of the PAT and the Democratic Party has received the backing of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO). The ISO has praised the PAT for having "modeled its contract campaign on that of the Chicago Teachers Union," which it claimed won a great victory in the 2012 strike.

In fact, the strike was betrayed by the CTU—which opposed any mobilization of the working class against Mayor Rahm Emanuel—Obama's former chief of staff—and the Democratic Party. The defeat was followed by the shutdown of 50 schools, the largest mass school closure in US history. In exchange, a CTU-affiliated union was given the franchise to organize, and collect dues from, highly exploited charter school teachers.

A real struggle by Portland teachers is possible and absolutely necessary. But this requires taking the conduct of the fight out of the hands of the PAT and developing a political strategy to mobilize the broadest support in the working class for a fight to defend public education against the attacks by both big business parties.

Teachers should elect rank-and-file committees, made up of the most militant and trustworthy teachers, and organize a struggle independently of the PAT and the other unions. These committees should unite teachers, students and parents and appeal to the broadest sections of workers for joint strike action against the destruction of public education and other essential services and the

unrelenting attack on jobs and living standards.

After funneling trillions to the rich in bank bailouts and other handouts, the corporate and political establishment is demanding a "new normal" of austerity, poverty and wage cuts. More than five years since crashing the economy, the financial aristocracy has never had it so good.

The defense of public education is above all a political fight. The social rights of the vast majority cannot be secured unless the working class breaks the dictatorial grip of the corporate and financial elite over economic and political life and reorganizes production and the distribution of wealth on the basis of social need, not private profit.

For this the working class needs a political party of its own, independent of the pro-capitalist unions and the Democratic Party. The Socialist Equality Party urges Portland teachers to study its program and to help build a new fighting socialist leadership in the working class.



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