

Portland school officials intransigent as deadline for teachers strike looms

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Mediated negotiations between Portland Public Schools (PPS) and Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) continued Monday and Tuesday apparently without progress as a February 20 deadline approaches for the first teachers strike in the district's history. According to the union's Facebook page, "Unfortunately, their proposal offers no changes from their Jan 31st version."

Last week, after ten months of negotiations, teachers voted overwhelmingly to strike against the concessionary demands that PPS has insisted on. Portland is Oregon's largest school district with 2,900 teachers and 48,000 students.

Last week, 600 teachers in the Medford school district in southern Oregon walked out after facing similar ultimatums in the state's eighth-largest school district. On Tuesday, district officials reopened the schools for four hours using substitute teachers as strikebreakers.

The Portland school district has been unbending in its demands that teachers accept an uncapped class size, increased workload and cuts to retirement benefits among other concessions. PPS is also rejecting any restriction on its use of standardized testing to determine student progress and teacher competency.

According to media reports, the district has dropped its demand for a health insurance cap due to anticipated lower costs next year. The prospect of enrolling employees under President Obama's Affordable Care Act, school officials expect, would allow them to further offload the district's healthcare costs onto individual teachers.

Many teachers are angered at the refusal of school superintendent Carol Smith to apply an unexpected influx of nearly \$20 million in state money toward hiring more teachers. While PPS is hiring additional teachers—some due to state mandates—it is far from sufficient to relieve the overcrowded classrooms. Oregon already has the third-largest class sizes in the nation

Over the last 13 years Portland teachers have been forced by PPS, with the assistance of the union, to make one concession after another. In 2003 PAT signed a contract that required teachers to work two weeks without pay. That contract, which averted a strike, took Portland teachers from being the third-highest paid in the state to 14th. In 2004 teachers began paying seven percent of their health insurance coverage. In 2011 the union forced through a waiver of a cost-of-living increase.

There is widespread support for the teachers. In the days prior to the vote students at several area high schools walked out in support of the teachers, with over 600 students walking out of Cleveland High School the same day as the vote.

While PAT officials have repeatedly tried to prevent a walkout and have made no preparations for a serious struggle, the school board has been busy preparing plans to break a strike. Recent media reports cite plans by PPS to initially close schools for three days, once the strike begins, and then reopen with a focus on elementary and middle schools. It has been recruiting strikebreakers since before the strike vote. PPS is offering scabs a guaranteed five days of pay the first week regardless of how long the strike lasts.

Writing to 4,000 substitutes from school lists outside the PPS district, Sean Murray, the district's head of human resources said, "We are inviting all licensed substitutes to apply for work for Portland Public Schools as temporary certified replacement workers during a potential strike to ensure a safe, educational environment for all our students." In addition, PPS posted an advertisement on Craigslist website, for, "PK-12 Oregon licensed teachers and classified staff..."

From the start district officials have conducted themselves in the most provocative manner: invoking mediation as soon as legally permitted and declaring an impasse soon afterwards, which created the legal basis for

the union to call a strike vote. This is in accord with school board member Matt Morton's declaration 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." PAT president Gwen Sullivan denounced this action as "pushing the union toward a strike."

The school board knows it has the backing of the Democratic Party, which controls the state and city governments, and has spearheaded the attack on public education nationally, with President Obama leading the charge.

On the eve of the strike vote, Mayor Charlie Hales told KOIN 6 News that the city would not provide any extra funding to avert a walkout. "It would be very harmful to the quality of life in Portland if we had a strike," he said, adding, "but there really isn't the potential for the city to step in. Our budget is better than it was, but there is no extra."

While giving massive tax breaks to Nike and other companies, Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber has provided no resources to reduce burgeoning class sizes or relieve overworked teachers. On the contrary, he has worked with the head of the Oregon Business Council to fashion an Obama-style "school reform agenda," which ties funding even more closely to academic standards and facilitates the opening of more charter schools to divert public money into private hands.

The PAT is aligned with the Democrats and is opposed to any struggle by the working class against this big business party. It is following the pattern of the Chicago Teachers Union, which betrayed the 2012 strike by 26,000 teachers and capitulated to Mayor Rahm Emanuel's demands for mass school closings and the use of test-based standards to victimize and layoff teachers.

The PAT has blocked any strike by school bus drivers who authorized such action after more than a year of fruitless negotiations with student transportation giant First Student. Instead, it has sought at every point to wear down teachers promising that endless negotiations, combined with appeals to the same Democratic Party politicians, would protect their jobs and livelihoods.

The PAT has been supported in this effort by pseudo-left groups, including the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which have insisted that teachers and their student supporters accept the unchallenged authority of the PAT and the subordination of their struggle to the union's relations with the Democratic Party.

The ISO has revived its so-called "social justice

unionism" model to cover up for the betrayal of the PAT. This includes following the lead of the Chicago Teachers Union in issuing a toothless document called "The Schools Portland Students Deserve" that makes a few references to standardized testing, over-sized classes and calls for more educational funding, which are all designed to promote illusions in the Democratic Party and conceal its role in backing the corporate-driven attack on public education.

If the powerful support teachers enjoy is to be mobilized and a serious fight to defend public education is to be waged, then the conduct of the struggle must be taken out of the hands of the PAT and other unions. Rank-and-file committees of the most militant and trusted teachers should be organized, independently of the PAT, to mobilize the widest support throughout the working class for a struggle to defend the teachers and public schools.

Public education is a social right. To defend it, however, requires a conscious political struggle against both big business parties and for a fundamental redistribution of wealth from the corporate and financial elite to the broad masses of working people. There is no avoiding the fact that teachers, like the working class as a whole, face a corporate-backed political structure, which is determined to transfer the billions of dollars spent on public education to the banks, corporations and ultra-wealthy.

That is why it is impossible to wage a successful struggle if the unions subordinate it to the Democratic Party and the lie that there is no money for education. Teachers in St. Paul, Minnesota, New York City, Detroit and throughout the country face the same struggle. The defense of public education and the rights of teachers is only possible on the basis of building a mass political movement of the working class, which has as its aim impounding the ill-gotten wealth of the financial aristocracy and the socialist transformation of society. We urge Portland teachers and their supporters to contact the Socialist Equality Party to prepare the new leadership for this struggle.



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