

# Portland teachers to vote on tentative contract deal

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Teachers in Portland, Oregon will be voting this week on a tentative agreement reached after ten months of negotiations. Just days before teachers were set to walk out in the first teachers strike in the city's history, a tentative agreement was reached between the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) and the school board.

The union has refused to publicly release details of the agreement pending the vote by the rank and file. What details have emerged indicate that the PAT made significant concessions to Portland Public Schools (PPS). On wages, the union has settled for a miserly 2.3 percent over three years—far from the 11.5 percent over two years originally demanded. To add insult to injury, the school year will be extended by several days.

Seniority will be dropped as the determining factor in layoffs. Last year PPS described it as a “bureaucratic roadblock” and moreover, in a bid to divide teachers along racial lines, as preventing the retention of “minority and bilingual teachers.” In fact, the destruction of job security will facilitate the arbitrary victimization and firing of teachers by administrators looking to purge the schools of outspoken teachers.

The response of the 48,000-student district to having one of the largest class sizes in the nation is to hire a paltry 150 additional teachers. Even PAT's chief negotiator, Monty Pavlik, described the 175 positions it demanded as “a drop in the bucket as opposed to what is really needed.” Additionally, the language on adding more teachers is tenuous at best and will not be included in the contract, but placed in a memorandum of understanding.

Matt Morton, PPS liaison for labor relations and one of the more adamant members of the school board, hailed the proposal as providing “flexibility for our schools.”

The union's acceptance of the tentative agreement

effectively blocks a strike by teachers in the largest school district in Oregon. Determined to stop over a decade of concessions demanded by the district and forced through by the union, nearly all of Portland's 2,900 teachers voted to strike earlier this month. Their readiness to fight for decent wages and working conditions received huge support from parents and students, many of whom staged walkouts at several high schools to denounce the attack on teachers and education by the school board.

Instead of mobilizing this widespread support behind the teachers, the union sought at every point to prevent a strike. Above all, the PAT and its parent organization, the National Education Association (NEA) were determined to prevent a political confrontation with the Democratic Party, which controls the state and local government, and the Obama administration, which is spearheading the dismantling of public education. The PAT and NEA enjoy the closest ties with the Democratic Party and have been partners in its anti-teacher “school reform” agenda.

Over the last five months, PPS had proceeded on a forced march toward a confrontation with the teachers—invoking mediation and then impasse as soon as each step was legally allowed. The district began making preparations to break a strike last fall. After the vote for strike authorization, it sent out a statewide letter to substitute and replacement teachers and also posted an ad on Craigslist, offering strikebreakers a full week's pay regardless of whether the week was completed or not.

All this was in line with PPS labor relations liaison Morton's declaration that, “From the board's perspective we need to be aggressive about this, business as usual has gotten us to a place that is not tolerable anymore.” However, concerns began to

emerge within the Democratic Party establishment that the union might not be able to contain the anger of teachers, students and parents if the PAT was completely sidelined.

On February 15, five days prior to the scheduled walkout, eight Democratic Oregon legislators, including the speaker of the house, sent both PPS and PAT a letter posturing as opponents of large class sizes and overworked teachers. In fact the Democratic Party is chiefly responsible for these miserable conditions.

Having several days earlier already made serious concessions on wage increases, shorter transfer process and teacher competence for transfer and layoffs, the PAT used the legislators' letter as a political cover for the rotten deal it signed to prevent a strike.

As it prepared this betrayal, the PAT enjoyed the full backing of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO). Throughout the negotiations the ISO worked to reinforce the authority of the PAT among teachers and students and subordinate the fight in defense of public education to the backroom dealings between the union executives and the Democratic Party.

A strike by teachers would have thrust them into a political confrontation with the Democratic Party-dominated state government and its pro-business education agenda. In 2011, Democratic governor John Kitzhaber introduced a "school reform" bill, passed with the support of House Republicans, expanding charter schools and consolidating public education from K-12 through the university level into an "Oregon Education Investment Board" staffed by appointees of the governor and abolishing the office of state schools superintendent.

That same year, Kitzhaber worked closely with the Oregon Business Council (OBC) through a group called "Learnworks" to produce recommendations, ostensibly to address Oregon's dismal national standing as 43rd in education performance and policy. The OBC, backed by the reactionary American Legislative Exchange Council—which is funded by the notorious Koch brothers—and the anti-public education Gates Foundation, proceeded, through Learnworks, to issue a report advancing a "private market" solution of "outcomes based funding" (OBF). OBF bases school funding on, among other criteria, graduation rate rather than total student enrollment. This is a model that

necessarily emphasizes standardized testing and ever declining funding for impoverished neighborhood schools.

In 2010, the Oregon Educational Association, the state parent body of the PAT, gave over \$3 million dollars to the state Democratic Party. Over \$1 million was donated to Kitzhaber's election campaign. Moreover, the NEA was the first union to endorse President Obama's bid for election even after he oversaw the destruction of hundreds of thousands of teachers' jobs and the doubling of charter school enrollment.

Teachers should reject this sellout agreement. There is widespread support for a genuine struggle in defense of education. To mobilize that support, however, teachers should establish rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the PAT and appeal for the widest support from the working class to defend public education.

Teachers must reject the lie, peddled by the Democrats and Republicans, that there is "no money" for education. The needs of society, including access to high-quality education for all, must take precedence over the ever-greater accumulation of wealth by the corporate and financial elite. The vast resources created by society must be redirected from the ultra-wealthy to education and other social needs. This is only possible through breaking with the two big business parties and building of a mass socialist movement of the working class. We urge teachers, students and their supporters to contact the Socialist Equality Party to join in this effort.



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