

Pennsylvania school district contract to cut 15 percent of teachers

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Earlier this month, teachers in the Wilkesburg Education Association (WEA), representing the 128 teachers in the Wilkesburg School District in Pennsylvania, accepted a contract that will lay off 18 of their fellow workers, or 15 percent of teaching staff. This means 20 percent of the district's teachers have been furloughed in two years, following the gutting last year of 10 teaching and three support staff positions.

Wilkesburg, like many small school districts around the country, faces grinding poverty. It has been robbed of funding, first by the generous tax cuts given to corporations and then by the looting of state and local treasuries through the financial bailout of Wall Street.

According to the 2010 Census, the median household income in Wilkesburg Borough is \$29,620. About 16.5 percent of families and 22 percent of the total population are below the official federal poverty line. Poverty affects about 32 percent of those under age 18, and about 12 percent of those 65 or over.

According to a February 28 article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, a staggering one-third of all students in the district are homeless, which contributes to the 75 percent habitual truancy rate—those with six or more unexcused absences—in the high school and middle school.

Merging of staff will mean the same teachers will teach core subjects from grades 7-12, rather than from grades 7-9 or 10-12. This tragedy is being billed as a benefit to the district's middle and high school students. School Board President Ed Donovan claims that teaching time will apparently be freed up for the 269 students to take more advanced core subjects and varied electives. Many students currently take classes for only a few periods a day because there are so few course offerings. What Donovan does not consider is that perhaps there are so few course offerings because there are so few teachers.

The reality is that these work rule changes mean fewer teachers are teaching more classes. Classes will be

overcrowded, with teachers having less time to prepare and assess student work and therefore improve the quality of education. The school district has minimal resources, with the lack of high school textbooks forcing teachers to make photocopies for their students, usually at their own expense.

The WSWS spoke to workers and students about the situation in Wilkesburg.

Erica Howard, 20, said she left before graduating. "I felt like I wasn't learning anything," she said. "All we had was substitute teachers and one teacher didn't know what the other one was teaching us. Those who ran the school didn't care if we got an education or not. I went to Job Corps and now I am working at Giant Eagle [supermarket] and working to get my GED."

Maureace Snead, a 26-year-old father, told the WSWS, "I have a four-year-old so I am very concerned about the schools. I think there needs to be a better budget; there should be more money for education. This is their future and how are they supposed to survive if they don't get a good education?"

"They need money for new books, computers and other supplies. They have been using the same books for 20 years."

Maureace added, "Another thing that really concerns me is why children are paying for lunch. There are many children who cannot afford it. You cannot learn if your stomach is growling all day long. If you go to jail, you eat for free, but you have to pay for lunch in school. We need more money for schools."

Phillip McKenzie has five children—ages 19, 17, 16, and twins who are 14. "We decided to take our children out of Wilkesburg school four years ago," he said. "Their mother moved to Pittsburgh and they now go to Carrick High School. When they first started there the teachers said that they were behind two years. I am not talking about just one or two classes, but in every subject.

“Young people need an education if they are going to have a chance in this world. The books are out of date. They need computers and more, not fewer, teachers. There are a lot of problems with the Pittsburgh schools, but they are much better than those in Wilkinsburg. The kids are not getting a fair chance that others are getting.”

“I think the budget cuts are wrong,” he added. “There are a lot of places that could be cut, but education is not something that should be. The media tries to blame the parents, to say that they are not concerned. But many parents are working jobs to earn money to support their family and they can’t always be home for the kids.”

Sarah Murphy told the WSWS, “I went to school for teaching. I did my student teaching at Turner in Wilkinsburg in 2007-2008, in 1st and 3rd grade. I graduated from IUP [Indiana University of Pennsylvania] in 2009. Wilkinsburg has the highest property taxes in Allegheny County, but standardized test scores are terrible.

“Most of the kids in the charter schools are doing better. Lots of districts are losing kids to charter schools. It’s a two-edged sword when kids leave. The schools lose funding when they don’t do well, and then they do worse. If only they’d fixed the problems with that money instead.

“I’m still working in education. I’m a director at a daycare, and my family owns a youth treatment center. The kids don’t have people doing interesting things with reading. I got into my student teaching and there is such a disconnect between what you learned and what really happens in classrooms.”

She continued, “You can see that all of the kids at Turner are in the free lunch program and live in poverty. I’ve lived in Wilkinsburg for 20 years and it’s different than when I was a kid, because other than the sports teams there is not much to do after school.

“You also know that the kids don’t have parental involvement. It got so bad that the teacher stopped giving the students homework because only three would bring it back. I’m not blaming the parents, because they are most likely working two jobs. Sadly you find that the third graders are taking care of the younger ones.

“It was completely disheartening. I couldn’t do the job and see those things. I cared. That’s why so many teachers leave teaching. Don’t get me wrong, there are a lot of good teachers there now, but I know at least three other people that are not teaching and would be excellent.”

“I didn’t want to become cynical after 20 years,” Sarah

said. “So I’m still in the field, but it’s not at a public school. My student teaching left a bad taste in my mouth. I never get to use the boxes and boxes of lessons that I made. There’s no flexibility to teach creatively; it’s all ‘teach to the test.’ So many things are thrown by the wayside for the testing. There are so many social skills that they don’t learn.”

Sharon, asked about the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program, responded, “No Child Left Behind already did enough damage. If anything, that should have been cut out. They really want to talk accountability if you’re a teacher, when federally they have destroyed what happens at the state level. More money is spent researching how kids learn, but no money is spent on enacting it.”

She commented on the job losses in the area over the last two decades. “They are moving the poor people out of the city and into the eastern suburbs, and then cutting the buses. Section 8 vouchers are moving to the outskirts, and those districts are being destroyed.”

Alisha Wheaton stopped with her two sons to talk to the WSWS about the layoffs and Wilkinsburg’s deficit. “This is a mess,” she said. “The district needs more money, not less. My kids are on the honor roll here. They are doing better than they were at Woodland Hills.

“We definitely need more money, especially when they have it with all of the development that’s taking place in the greater Pittsburgh area. What could be more important than our schools? This entire area—Wilkinsburg, Pittsburgh Public Schools—is completely different because of budget cuts being made by the government.

“Children are our future and theirs is being taken away. From 2000 to now the number of homicides has gone crazy. They’re just kids, but there’s nothing for them to do. There used to be the ‘Y’, and the Boys and Girls Club, but they’re all gone. There are no programs for teens, no Big Brothers and Sisters programs anymore. It’s sad.”



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