

Teachers strike in three Pennsylvania school districts

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Teachers in three Pennsylvania school districts have gone on strike. In each case the teachers have worked for several years without a contract, have seen real wages fall and are now facing cuts in health care benefits.

Teachers in the East Allegheny School District, located east of Pittsburgh, went on strike on Tuesday, September 2. East Allegheny has 133 teachers who are members of the East Allegheny Education Association (EAEA). There are 1,700 students in the district, which includes the towns of North Versailles, Wilmerding, East McKeesport and Wall.

Teachers have been working without a contract since June 2012, when their previous contract expired. Since then they have not had a pay hike. The school board is proposing a five-year contract, in which wages would be frozen for the 2012-13 and 2013-2014 school years, and teachers would get a \$1,100 raise instead of the standard step increase for the current 2014-15 school year. Additionally, they would receive only one step raise in the 2015-16 and again in the 2016-17 years.

The teachers' pay is based on a 16-step scale, with teachers moving up one pay grade each year. Traditionally it would take 16 years for a teacher to reach top pay. The district's new proposal would effectively end the step system and require teachers to work for 20 years to reach top pay.

In addition, the school board is demanding teachers pay 50 percent of all increases in health care costs, a concession that would result in a de facto pay cut for instructors.

The teachers' union has already accepted a two-and-a-half year pay freeze.

Teachers in Millville School District in central Pennsylvania went on strike last month, after talks broke down with the district's 62 teachers, who have

worked without a contract since 2012. They have also not received raises in over two years.

In a provocative move, the school district published the salaries of each of the teachers on its web site. None, even of the most senior teachers, earned more than \$60,000 a year. However, the district is hoping to use that, along with the general media campaign demonizing teachers, to create popular anger at the teachers in an area that has been hard hit by the recession.

On Wednesday, September 3, teachers in the Old Forge School District also went on strike. Old Forge is located in the northeastern area of the state near the city of Scranton and has fewer than 1,000 students. Teachers in the district struck for three weeks at the start of the 2013-14 school year in a walkout that ended when the Old Forge Education Association accepted nonbinding arbitration without a contract.

Teachers there have been without a contract since 2010 and have not received a pay raise during this time. The school board is demanding that teachers accept a retroactive pay freeze for the 2010 through 2013 school years, a 2.75 percent raise for 2013-2014, 1.75 percent hike for the current school year and 1.5 percent next year. The board is also demanding that teachers pay a larger share of health care costs.

Pennsylvania law dictates that students must receive 180 days of instruction every year by June 15. Strikes that would prevent that are deemed illegal. The Pennsylvania Department of Education has determined that strikes must end by September 23.

The effect is that school districts have very little incentive to reach an agreement with the teachers. In more than 150 other school districts out of the state's 500, teachers are working without contracts. Around 20 of those school districts have contracts that expired two

or more years ago.

Pennsylvania schools have also faced massive state and federal budget cuts. Since coming to office in 2011, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett has cut the funds for public education by nearly \$1 billion. This has forced school districts throughout the state to either lay off teachers, cut programs, close schools or raise local taxes. Most have done some combination of all four.

This past June, the state budget shifted more of the cost of charter schools onto the local school districts, while giving increased tax breaks for private and religious schools.

The East Allegheny School District's website acknowledged that state and federal budget cuts led to rising pension and health care costs, and noted "exorbitant charter school costs" that contributed to the district's \$1 million deficit.

The American Federation of Teachers-Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania State Education Association, the two largest teachers unions in the state, have endorsed Democratic challenger Tom Wolf for governor. The unions are seeking to channel the anger of teachers, parents and students over the budget cuts into support for the Democratic Party, which has spearheaded the attack on public education from the Obama administration on down.

If Wolf were elected he would continue the cuts in education made by the Corbett administration. Wolf's proposal for education funding is based on a revision of the Pennsylvania income tax code, something that would take years if it were enacted at all. In addition, even if the measure passed, his changes to the income tax and additional state funding to school districts is contingent upon districts lowering property tax rates by the same amount, meaning the districts would be left with the same smaller budget.



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