

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area teachers in third week of strike

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East Allegheny teachers have entered the third week of their strike with virtually no progress in negotiations. The 133 teachers have been without a contract since June 2012. The school district has frozen wages for the last two years and is proposing a five-year contract with no wage increase until the 2015-2016 school year. It is proposing a \$1,100 stipend for the current school year. In addition, teachers will be expected to pay 50 percent of the increases in health care costs.

Teachers are members of the East Allegheny Education Association (EAEA), which has accepted a two-and-a-half-year freeze. However, the district, which reportedly has a \$1 million deficit due to cuts in school funding, is not budging. The clock is ticking toward the critical date of September 23, which is the last day that classes can resume to have the required 180 days of instruction by June 15, 2015. This raises the question of a state intervention to end the strike.

The East Allegheny School District is located to the east of Pittsburgh along the Monongahela River and covers the boroughs of East McKeesport, Wall and Wilmerding, and the North Versailles Township.

The area, which has been devastated by deindustrialization, was once a solid working class community based on the US steel mills in neighboring McKeesport and Duquesne, and the massive Westinghouse manufacturing plants in East Pittsburgh and Turtle Creek. At their peak, those plants employed tens of thousands of workers with thousands of others employed in supportive industries.

The recession of 2008 further impoverished the area, with many remaining workers losing their jobs or forced into low-paying and part-time work. The median household income in all four areas is below the state and national averages. The borough of Wall has the highest with a median household income of \$48,334 in

2012, compared to \$51,230 for the state as a whole, followed by North Versailles with a median household income of \$40,646, and East McKeesport at \$38,918. The borough of Wilmerding had a median household income of only \$19,904. The rate of childhood poverty is 30.6 percent in Wall, 37.4 percent in North Versailles, and 38.7 percent in Wilmerding.

The WSWWS spoke to striking teachers on the social crisis facing most of the students in the district.

Lou Gerbi, a middle school math and science teacher since 1994, and Tracy Yusko, who teaches second grade, spoke about the impact of the budget cuts on education in the district and the problems faced by students because of the recession and poverty in the area.

Lou explained, "It all started with the cuts. We saw a massive increase in class size. I know my classes went from 20 to 31 students. There have also been cuts to special area classes. When teachers retired, they were not replaced. We used to have both library and media teachers, now we just have one."

"It is worse in the K-3 where they don't have a librarian at all. Think about how that impacts the students. This is when children are learning to read. We have children from poor homes and it is nice for them to be able to take home two books each week."

Tracy, who works in the Green Valley Primary School, said, "They eliminated art for a few years, it was just brought back this year. They have combined the lunches so some of the students have to eat in the gym."

Tracy explained that the cuts have also meant that the building is not being kept up. "There is a problem with the steam boiler. The floor is hot to the touch. The roof is leaking and there is mold growing in the classrooms. We have asked for air quality tests. We have a lot of

students with asthma and we don't know if this is causing it or not."

"All these things," Tracy explained "makes it hard for the students to learn."

Both Tracy and Lou explained that the districts have a lot of transient families with students entering and leaving the district throughout the year. "We seem to get a lot of new students around in January and even the end of the year," Tracy said. "It is hard because we don't know where they have been and what level they are on. We get blamed for the district having bad test scores, but if you look at the students that went from K-12 in our district, they do really well."

Both teachers also explained that cuts in the high school to the Advanced Placement (AP) classes and sports program have led to students leaving the district so that they have more opportunity for college. "We have parents who tell us that they love the teachers, but they have to leave so their children can take AP classes or play different sports," Lou said.

Lou explained that charter schools, especially the cyber charter school, are taking a lot of money out of the district. "No one knows just what the students are learning and who is doing the work. The cyber school buys the student a laptop and pays for their cable. There are a lot of low income families in our district and the offer to buy a laptop is a big deal."

Lou complained about the lack of funding for education, "what is more important than kids' education. This is our future. Education funding should be number one."



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