

Teachers strike in Reynoldsburg, Ohio

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Last Friday, teachers in the Columbus, Ohio suburb of Reynoldsburg voted overwhelmingly to take strike action, rejecting a binding arbitration offer by the Reynoldsburg City School Board.

The 364 teachers, members of the Reynoldsburg Education Association (REA), voted in response to a contract proposed by the school board that left open the option for larger class sizes and the imposition of merit pay. The teachers—whose previous contract expired on June 30—rejected the school board’s proposal by a margin of 97 percent on September 7.

The binding arbitration offer would have appointed a mediator to lead negotiations and impose supposedly impartial, fair compromises upon the union and the board.

In addition to the issues of merit pay and class sizes, many rank-and-file teachers have raised the need for generally better working conditions, including more planning time, textbooks and supplies, and health insurance.

The issues in Reynoldsburg are nearly identical to those behind the strike in the Cleveland suburb of Strongsville last year, where teachers were targeted for merit pay, or so-called “pay for performance” and “value-added measures.” These policies are aimed at getting rid of better-paid, higher-seniority teachers by allowing them to be fired on the basis of standardized test scores.

While such policies are being implemented by administrators at the local level, they are part of a broader attack on public education being spearheaded by the Obama administration and its state-level counterparts. Obama’s Race To The Top program ties federal funding to standardized testing schemes, cost cutting and privatization.

Ohio’s Republican Governor John Kasich has likewise championed the gutting of public education in the state, cutting K-12 funding by billions of dollars in the past several years. Charter schools have spread like wildfire, depleting public schools of per-pupil funding in already economically distressed areas.

Reynoldsburg Superintendent Tina Thomas-Manning

stated in response to the strike, “We are committed to ensuring that the board has flexibility to reward high quality teachers and to retain high quality teachers and to attract and recruit high quality teachers to our district, so whatever it takes to get to that objective, the board and I are committed to getting there.”

Teachers began picketing at the schools Friday, where classes remained in session, staffed by scabs from Michigan-based Huffmaster Strike Services. Some 100 subs are filling in for the 364 teachers, according to local media, necessitating a virtual lockdown of classrooms except for limited bathroom breaks. The police are on call to respond to student fights, according to reports, and students who do not attend school may be arrested for truancy if they are seen joining the picket lines.

The REA held a rally Saturday attended by hundreds of local residents and delegations of teachers from Ohio Education Association-affiliated locals. Teachers from across the state have flooded the REA’s Facebook page with messages of solidarity, and yard signs throughout Reynoldsburg signaled a widespread support for the teachers on the part of residents. Unofficial petitions of “no confidence,” calling for the resignation of the Reynoldsburg school board, received scores of signatures.

Notwithstanding critical language against Superintendent Thomas-Manning and the school board, however, the REA’s conduct of the strike remains entirely within the confines of appeals to the board and state political establishment. At Saturday’s rally, union officials led chants and toted signs declaring they would hold “meaningful negotiations anytime.” Kathy Evans, the REA’s spokeswoman, stressed that the union wanted “the board to come to the table and really work with us to settle the contract.”

The National Education Association was one of the first unions to endorse Obama’s reelection campaign in 2012, saying afterwards that the election of the Democratic president who has spearheaded the attack on teachers was a “victory for students and their educators.”

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* attended the

rally and spoke to parents, teachers and community members about the strike and the broader attack on public education and other basic social rights.

“Once the teachers left, we obviously support them and want them back in the schools,” explained Kori, the mother of kindergartener Lucas.

“I totally respect the Reynoldsburg teachers for standing up,” added grandmother Darla. “It’s not an easy thing to do. You don’t want to leave your classes and leave the kids.”

Kori agreed, emphasizing the hardships faced by the striking teachers. “They get no insurance and they don’t get paid. You don’t know their family life at home. They may be the only income. And obviously, they’re standing up for this and for our kids.”

Both Kori and Darla agreed that the attack on striking teachers was politically motivated with the purpose of setting a precedent for other school districts. “We feel like it goes up to [Governor] Kasich’s level,” said Kori. “We feel like it starts there and it’s trickling down and Reynoldsburg is unfortunately the guinea pig. If this passes the other districts are going to pass. And it’s not what our students need. It’s not what our kids need. It’s definitely not what the community needs.”

“I think they’re pushing for merit pay,” explained Darla. “I’m a teacher and a grandparent. I live in Reynoldsburg and I’m totally against merit pay for teachers.”

Kay is a retired teacher with 30 years’ experience. She worked for the public school district of Groveport, a Columbus suburb a few miles from Reynoldsburg, which was the scene of a 21-day strike in 1989 over the victimization of teachers. She and other veterans of the 1989 strike, like Lynn, attended the rally to show their support.

“It’s just plain asinine to think that you can pay somebody according to student performance on a test,” she said. “I had 150 students a day and I had good results with testing, but that doesn’t mean I’m any better of a teacher than the one next door. I’m only as good as the two of us work together.”

Kay complained that schools cannot be run as if they are factories. “If you’re working at Ford and a piece comes down the line and it’s defective, you throw it over in the corner. You can’t do that with children.”

She pointed to the problems of poverty—such as hunger, domestic instability and the lack of school supplies—afflicting the academic development of children. “It’s not an educational problem; it’s a societal

problem.”

Looking back at her own career, Kay explained that she and other teachers could see the problems coming as testing schemes were being introduced in the US about 30 years ago. “I’d say the last 10 years I was in the classroom you could see testing moving. All the teachers talked about how this could hang us all. I’d say the last year I taught, I taught to the test instead of doing what I’d done all these years. I had had success, then I was forced to teach to the test.”

“It’s going to get nasty before it gets better and it’s already gotten nasty,” said Kay. She told about how she knew of one employee in the district who was ordered to cross the picket line or else be fired.

Kay also saw the strike as being politically motivated. “The state school board has two of our former superintendents from this district who were hired by [Governor] Kasich,” she explained. “If you remember State Bill 5 last year, it went down, but it was an effort to break the union. I feel like they decided to divide and conquer and thought teachers were the most vulnerable. And if this goes through in this district, it will be bad for the whole United States because every state does testing.”

Lynn, who also walked the pickets in the 1989 Groveport strike, noted that most of the young teachers of Reynoldsburg had never seen a strike. “It will never be the same after the strike,” she said. “It tears relationships apart. Teachers and administrators will look at one another differently, with an ‘us against them’ relationship afterward. This will change their lives for years.”



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