Strike of Reynoldsburg, Ohio teachers in its fourth week

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The strike of more than 350 teachers in the Columbus, Ohio suburb of Reynoldsburg has entered its fourth week. The teachers are waging a struggle to improve school conditions and prevent the imposition of a merit pay scheme, which would tie teacher compensation to student performance.

The Reynoldsburg Education Association (REA), the union representing the striking teachers, and the Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education (BOE) last met on September 28. The four-hour mediation session ended without a settlement or any additional mediation sessions being scheduled.

Negotiations have been ongoing since May with the teachers' contract expiring at the end of July. In August, the REA membership gave the union negotiating team the authority to issue a 10-day strike notice, which was invoked a month later on September 8, five days before the start of the new school year.

On September 18, teachers voted overwhelmingly to reject the BOE's final contract proposal, as well as an offer for binding arbitration, choosing instead to proceed to the picket lines on the morning of Friday, September 19.

At the last meeting between the two sides, the union bargaining team was presented with the same contract proposal rejected by teachers on September 18 by 97 percent. According to the REA Co-President Kim Cooper, the union was 10 minutes into formulating a counterproposal when the BOE's bargaining team abruptly left. Given that the board's proposal remained unchanged, it is unclear what the union was preparing to concede on.

Parents, students and community members have continued their outpouring of support for the teachers. Rallies held on September 20 and 28 attracted hundreds from the school district and around the state. Many students have also joined their teachers on the picket lines instead of attending classes under the aegis of the strikebreaking firm Huffmaster Strike Services.

The REA's Facebook page chronicles scores of photos of solidarity from teachers throughout the state who correctly view Reynoldsburg as a test case for imposing similar attacks in other districts. The teachers' struggle in Reynoldsburg follows a similar strike last year by teachers in the Cleveland suburb of Strongsville.

However, the REA—an affiliate of the statewide Ohio Education Association and the National Education Association—has isolated this struggle and prevented the strike from becoming the starting point for a broader mobilization of the working class against the bipartisan assault being waged on public education. In conducting the strike, the union has kept it firmly within the confines of appeals to the BOE and the political establishment.

While the assault on the Reynoldsburg teachers is being carried out in the immediate sense by the local school board, the BOE is merely the front line of the anti-education agenda of Ohio's Republican governor, John Kasich, and, on the national level, by the Obama administration.

Since coming to office in 2011, Kasich has cut the state's education budget by more than a billion dollars while expanding various voucher programs to funnel public money to a proliferation of charter schools and other private institutions. Meanwhile, Kasich has also placed Ohio at the forefront of targeting teachers through merit pay schemes and "value-added" measures.

The Obama administration, through its Race To The Top program, has made federal education funding conditional on the expansion of standardized testing,

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cost cutting, and privatizations. For its part, the REA and its parent organizations are politically tied to the Obama administration and the Democratic Party and opposed to any mobilization of the working class against it.

In its initial contract proposal, the BOE sought to eliminate group health insurance, seeking to replace it with a stipend for teachers to obtain individual plans. Although the BOE has since backed away from this position, the proposal was completely in line with the Obama administration's reactionary health care "reform" and its mission to cut costs for businesses and governments while rationing care.

The BOE's initial proposal also called for the elimination of the traditional teacher salary schedule of step raises, replacing it with a merit pay system tied to the state's mandated teacher evaluation system, which in turn is tied to student performance. The school board has since offered to maintain the traditional step raises, albeit at a reduced rate, with performance bonuses starting in the contract's second year.

While publicly opposing merit pay, the REA bargaining team has quietly offered up concessions on the issue while focusing the attention of the negotiations on class-size caps. While the union argues that controlling class sizes is central to stemming the high turnover rate and ensuring a good learning environment for students—which is no doubt true—they have no policy to fight the attack on teachers' jobs and the budget cutting that is behind overcrowded classrooms.

While enrollment at Reynoldsburg schools has increased by nearly 2,000 students since the 2011-12 school year, teaching positions have not kept pace. According to the Ohio Department of Education, the Reynoldsburg district has the worst student-to-teacher ratio among the 16 districts in Franklin County.

Under the impact of corporate-backed school reforms and deteriorating working conditions, the Reynoldsburg district lost 66 of its teachers—nearly one out of every five—before the start of the current school year. This comes on top of the nearly 40 teachers who left the district during the 2012-13 school year.

After initially pushing for elementary, middle school, and high school class-size caps of 20-23, 25, and 25, respectively, the union has since offered up caps at 25, 30, and 30.

However, the latest BOE proposal contains no caps on class size, only a promise that "every effort should be made to provide one (1) full-time equivalent classroom teacher for each twenty-five (25) pupils in average daily membership on a District-wide basis." Added to this language is the caveat that "due to a lack of proper financing, it may not be possible to reach this goal."

The school board maintains the class size limits the teachers are fighting for would necessitate the hiring of 16 new teaching positions; something it claims is financially impossible.

Under the previous three-year contract, Reynoldsburg teachers accepted concessions on compensation, including a freeze on cost-of-living and step increases last school year.

Reynoldsburg Schools Superintendent Tina Thomas-Manning is fond of pointing out that, under the BOE's last proposal, more than 79 percent of teachers would receive a raise of 13 percent or more over the three-year life of the contract.

Now the BOE is using promises of the meager wage increases to smear teachers as greedy in the media while pushing structural reform measures aimed at undermining public education and working conditions.

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