Stockton, California teachers endorse possible strike action

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Expressing widespread dissatisfaction over pay and working conditions, teachers in Stockton voted on March 10 to authorize a strike. The Stockton Teachers Association (STA) been negotiating a new contract since the middle of 2013, at issue are class sizes and teacher pay.

After the last contract expired teachers have been working under an extension agreement between the Stockton Unified School District (SUSD) and the STA that expires in August 2016. The strike authorization passed with 97 percent in favor and 88 percent participation.

SUSD responded almost immediately by filing an unfair labor practices charge against the STA alleging that strike preparations were illegal under the current extension which prohibits all strikes and collective action. The teacher's union claims that through a convoluted mediation process they can circumvent the no-strike clause of their agreement.

The STA and SUSD began a fact-finding mission March 16 with a "neutral" arbiter to reach a compromise. The process is expected to end by mid-April after which the district can impose its last contract offer which would enable the union to legally strike. It is unclear if the district will impose a contract while the union still has its members locked into a no-strike agreement.

For its part the STA has lodged a labor complaint against the district for advertising pay of $305 a day for any substitute teachers willing to scab in event of a strike. Regular pay for a substitute teacher is $138 a day and the union claims the increased pay would be illegal.

While negotiations continue under the no-strike agreement, teachers are not receiving any raises. According to the SUSD web site the district would have spent an average of $6,765 more per teacher in compensation if their meager contract offer had been accepted last year.

The entire episode has the character of a stunt designed to convince teachers that the union is taking a tough stance in negotiations without actually carrying out a struggle for better wages and conditions. The role of the union in this regard is most sharply expressed by the fact they entered into a three year no-strike agreement after the last contract expired. The union's claim to be searching for a loophole is simply a pretense to cover for their collaboration in the reduction of teacher's living standards and the dismantling of public education.

Teachers in Stockton work in a city that was particularly hard hit by the 2008 economic crisis. The average home lost two-thirds of its value over the following five years and the city's foreclosure rate was the second highest in the US. With a sharp decline in tax revenue, the city of Stockton began bankruptcy proceedings that only ended in February of this year.

As has been the case throughout the country workers were made to pay for the city's financial crisis. Stockton fired 30 percent of its firefighters, 25 percent of its police and 43 percent of its other municipal workers. City employees took a 23 percent pay cut and retirees lost all of their medical coverage.

Any strike that sought to rally workers in defense of Stockton teachers would immediately confront the concerted opposition of the unions and the Democratic Party at the state and national levels.

The deteriorating conditions in Stockton schools are the result of this broader attack on social services and working class living standards that the STA, as part of the California Teachers Association (CTA), has supported.

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As a staunch backer of the Democratic Party the CTA has been a party to the attack on teachers at every level. The CTA has supported Jerry Brown, the Democratic Governor in California, with millions of dollars in support. Brown is famously in favor of “pension reform” based off of higher employee contributions and privately run charter schools in opposition to public education.

The CTA also supports the Democrats in their attacks on public education at the national level. They backed President Barack Obama for president in both terms, even as he implemented school “reform” through Education Secretary Arne Duncan. In Chicago where 26,000 teachers struck in 2012, this took the form of about 50 schools being closed and 3,500 teachers and school workers being laid off.

While the Obama administration claims there is no money for public education it demands billions in additional military funding and has funneled trillions of dollars into the hands of banks since the start of the economic crisis.

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