

Washington state teachers hold one-day strikes over wages, class sizes

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Teachers in the three Seattle area school districts walked out Wednesday as part of a series of one-day strikes in the state of Washington planned for the next week. Educators are opposing the state legislature's school budget and demanding improved funding for reduced classroom sizes and improved wages and benefits for the state's 53,000 public school teachers.

Teachers, parents and students joined picket lines Wednesday in front of schools in Stanwood-Camano, Arlington and Lakewood. Teachers voted to walk out Friday in Bellingham—just south of the Canadian border—and nearby Blaine, Ferndale and Mount Vernon districts. A one-day walkout is also planned for next Tuesday in Sedro-Woolley.

The strikes were the result of near unanimous votes by teachers in the eight school districts and involve some 3,000 educators. On Monday night building leaders for the Seattle Education Association voted to recommend a one-day strike by 5,000 teachers in Washington's most populous city. Seattle teachers will vote on the proposal next week, with any action likely occurring in early May, according to union officials.

A rally is scheduled on the steps of the state capitol in Olympia on Saturday, April 25, the day before the regular session of the state legislature ends.

"We're out here to show support to our educators," Charity, a parent on the picket line in Arlington told KING-5 News. Her daughter Tori added that the strike "can help us, our whole school and all of the kids doing it. We want smaller class sizes so we can learn and get a better education."

The Washington Education Association (WEA) has deliberately limited the strikes to one day and a small fraction of the state's teachers. It is also seeking to channel anger into impotent appeals to the big business politicians in Olympia. Nevertheless, the walkouts

express the growing opposition of teachers throughout the United States against the relentless attack on public education and the campaign to vilify teachers for the problems caused by decades of bipartisan budget cutting, school closures and growth of poverty in working class school districts.

Allied with the Democratic Party, the WEA called the actions to let off steam under conditions in which its appeals to the state government have proven utterly worthless and teachers are demonstrating growing militancy.

"We are not a radical community, we are not a radical school district, but we had a record attendance at our membership meeting and we had 93 percent vote to go out (on strike)," Larry Delaney, president of the Lakewood Education Association, told KVI radio.

The Republican-controlled state Senate is proposing a pay raise of only three percent over two years—after teachers suffered a six-year freeze—while increasing out-of-pocket health care expenses that more than wipe out any raises. The state Senate also wants to increase class sizes in grades four to 12 and in high-poverty schools, the union said. The legislators also want to mandate the use of state test scores for so-called teacher evaluation.

In the face of this the WEA is urging teachers to place their confidence in the state Supreme Court. In 2014, the high court issued a ruling that state legislators had not fulfilled their constitutional obligation to adequately fund the schools, however it has done nothing to enforce its decision. The same court recently upheld the unilateral decision of the state legislature to cut the pensions of 100,000 retired teachers.

The policy of starving the public schools of resources is just as much the responsibility of the Democratic Party, which controls the state House of Representatives, the governor's office and the White

House.

While claiming the state lacks resources, Governor Jay Inslee and the state legislature passed the largest corporate tax reduction in US history when it handed aerospace and defense giant Boeing \$8.7 billion in 2013. The bipartisan vote provided eleven different tax cuts, which run at least through 2040, after Boeing threatened to move production of its new 777X model to another state. Boeing just saw its first quarter profits jump 38 percent to \$1.3 billion, beating Wall Street expectations.

State education funding has also been undermined by the Obama administration. Last year, Washington lost \$40 million in federal funding for failing to meet US Department of Education requirements to include statewide student test results in teacher evaluations.

Going well beyond his Republican predecessor's No Child Left Behind law, Obama has led the charge for corporate-backed "school reform," including pushing test-based teacher accountability schemes as a condition for federal funding. The latter has been used to wipe out hundreds of thousands of teacher jobs, close thousands of so-called "failing" public schools and funnel even more public resources to privately run charter school operations.

This policy has been followed by Democratic governors all over the country, including in New York state where Governor Andrew Cuomo wants to tie 50 percent of reading and math teachers' evaluations—and their jobs and pay—to standardized test scores.

The campaign against teachers has found its sharpest expression in the brutal prison sentences handed down to Atlanta educators last week for a test cheating scandal driven by the Obama administration's punitive testing mandates. (See: Judge hands down brutal sentences in Atlanta test cheating case)

Teachers in Washington and around the country enjoy widespread sympathy and a genuine struggle in defense of public education could garner popular support. The biggest obstacle to this are the teachers' unions—the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state and local affiliates—who are allied with the Democratic Party and the capitalist profit system.

The NEA and AFT, which were among the first unions to promote Obama's election and re-election, are not opposed to corporate "school reform," but are

only looking to be partners in the process. Both unions received millions from enemies of public education like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to back Obama's Common Core curriculum.

Under conditions of growing opposition, the NEA and AFT are doing everything to isolate different sections of embattled teachers and sign sellout agreements that preserve the institutional interests of the union apparatus. United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA)—an AFT affiliate—has just agreed to a concession deal for 35,000 teachers, which includes insulting pay raises, after years of de facto wage cuts from furlough days, while abandoning any fight for smaller class sizes or against teacher victimizations.

The precondition for a real struggle is an understanding that teachers are in a confrontation with both big business parties and the profit system they defend. While tens of millions of working and middle class children are being deprived of the right to a quality public education, the Democrats and Republicans are handing trillions to the banks and major corporations like Boeing and squandering precious resources on war.

Teachers require new organizations, independent of the trade unions and the two corporate-controlled parties, to fight for the widest mobilization of the working class to defend and vastly improve public education. This should be the beginning of a fight to build a mass political movement, based on socialism, to defend the social rights of the working class and break the stranglehold of the corporate and financial elite over society.



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