

Seattle teachers hold one-day strike

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After a series of one-day teacher strikes in other parts of the state of Washington, 3,000 teachers from the Seattle School District—home to over 50,000 students—are walking out today to protest education funding cuts by the state legislature. The Washington Education Association (WEA) has called the one-day strike in an effort to dissipate anger over the cuts while containing opposition entirely within the framework of the Democratic Party.

Teachers in Washington, like those around the rest of the country, have experienced deteriorating work conditions and living standards, in particular since the 2008 financial crisis. Teachers' pay in Washington is 42nd lowest out of the 50 states while they are teaching in classrooms with larger numbers of students than in 45 other states.

In September 2014, the state Supreme Court held Washington in contempt for failing to adequately fund public education in the case of *McClearly v. State*. The high court ordered the state to come up with a plan that “makes progress” towards adequately funding education by 2018. While acknowledging that its court order was the result of a “culmination of a long series of events, not merely a single violation,” the high court judges did not impose any sanctions, saying instead that they would wait for state officials to fulfill their promises.

Two months later, the voters of Washington State approved Initiative I-1351, which called for a reduction in class sizes in K-12, with the maximum class size in K-3 grades set at 17 and for 4-12 no more than 25 students per class. It was noted then that implementing these measures would require hiring 15,000 additional teachers.

The current budget proposals advanced by the legislature—split between a Republican-controlled Senate and a Democratic-controlled House—fails to uphold the class size reductions. Instead, the state Senate is calling for increased class sizes, especially in impoverished areas, and to mandate the use of student test scores in evaluating teachers. The proposed budget would increase pay by only three percent over two years—after a six year wage freeze—while instituting greater out-of-pocket costs for health care that would more than wipe out any raises.

The plan also calls for “resetting” tuition rates at public

universities and community colleges without providing the resources needed to make college more affordable. Campuses will need to cope with these measures by instituting cutbacks on programs and teacher salaries.

The Democrats are working closely with the Republicans to package a deal as regressive as possible. For example, Ross Hunter (Democrat) lauded Republican Bruce Dammeir's SB 6109 as “a serious piece of work.” The proposal would dump all school employees into a state-run health care system, thus removing health care benefits as a part of collective bargaining.

Joan Sias, a parent in Seattle, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The court decision will not lead to an improvement in the classroom. The education business wants to tap into this money because then they can come up with all sorts of ways to cut down on teachers. Whether it helps the students is not their concern.”

While posturing as opponents of corporate-backed “school reform” and other privatization efforts, both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have collaborated with the Obama administration's attacks on public education and his scapegoating of educators for school problems produced by decades of budget cutting and the growth of social inequality.

Obama's Race to the Top program, closely modeled on former president Bush's No Child Left Behind scheme, has been used to close “failing schools,” fire thousands of teachers and accelerate the expansion of for-profit charter schools. Meanwhile, public education has been systematically starved of funds at the state and national level. The US Department of Education cut \$40 million in federal funding to Washington last year for failing to use student test scores in teacher evaluations.

In 2008, the Washington Education Association endorsed and campaigned for the re-election of Democratic Governor Christine Gregoire. Two years later, Gregoire signed a bill that approved a \$4 billion budget cut over two years. This included increasing state workers' share of health care premium costs from 12 percent to 15 percent, increasing class sizes by removing funding for size reduction,

eliminating bonuses for national teacher certification, eliminating step increases in pay and increasing tuition by double digits in most local universities over two years. University of Washington, Washington State University and Western Washington University saw 22 percent rate hikes.

Citing a WEA meeting in April where the vote for the walk out was taken, Robert Murphy, a teacher at Franklin High, described the gulf of difference that lay between the rank and file teachers and the union apparatus. “While the leaders were all running to the front of the parade, lost in their own bubble, worried about their connections in [the state capital of] Olympia, we were like, ‘let’s do this yesterday.’”

While the pro-corporate politicians claim there is no money for education, in November 2013 current Democratic Governor Jay Inslee and the state legislature government implemented the largest corporate tax cut in history: an \$8.7 billion tax break for Boeing through 2040. While cutting the state budget by \$1.2 billion, the educational funding increase of \$1.5 billion was paid for by slashing programs for the most vulnerable, including \$40 million from programs for the blind, disabled and old, and \$180 million from state welfare programs, including child care for the working poor.

The WEA has focused its criticism on the Republican state legislators in order to conceal the role of state Democrats and the Obama administration, as well the complicity of unions in the attacks on teachers and public education on a local, state and national level. Opposed to any struggle to mobilize the working class against the bipartisan attack on jobs, living standards and social rights, the unions have done everything to promote the illusion that teachers, parents and students can rely on the capitalist courts and various ballot initiatives to defend public education.

In this effort to disarm teachers and other sections of the working class, the WEA has enjoyed the support of various pseudo-left groups. This includes the International Socialist Organization (ISO) caucus inside the Seattle Education Association—the Social Equality Educators, which is led by Jesse Hagopian. In an interview with the *Real News*, Hagopian backed the union's bankrupt policy of one-day walkouts and its promotion of the State Supreme Court ruling, saying, “What we are doing in this one-day rolling strike around the state is actually upholding the law.” This is the same court that upheld the bi-partisan decision of the legislature to cut 100,000 retired teachers' pensions.

The ISO played the same role in the Chicago teachers' strike in September 2012, when Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) head, Karen Lewis, and ISO leader and CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, forced an end to the strike after a week before it could develop into a direct political confrontation with Obama's former Chief of Staff, Chicago

Mayor Rahm Emanuel, and the White House itself.

The sellout contract, which the CTU predictably hailed as a "victory," included the expansion of test-based evaluations, a longer school day without additional pay and the ability of principals to hire and fire teachers. This paved the way for the shut down of 54 schools and the layoff of thousands of teachers and other school employees.

The lessons have to be drawn out of these struggles. The determination of teachers to defend their jobs and the democratic right to high quality public education for their students pits them against the entire political establishment, from the Democrats and Republicans at every level of government to the AFT, NEA and its state and local affiliates, which are only seeking their own share of the spoils from the trillion dollar-plus “education market.”

The precondition for a genuine struggle is the building of rank and file committees lead by the most trusted and militant teachers, and organized independently of the WEA, SEA and other unions. These committees should fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class in mass demonstrations and strikes to demand a vast expansion of funding to hire more teachers, reduce class sizes and provide high quality public education for all youth.

The defense and vast improvement of public education is, above all, a political struggle, which poses the question of who will decide how society's resources are to be allocated. If the wealth created by working people is to be used to raise the intellectual and cultural level of the next generation, instead of for corporate tax breaks and the Pentagon war machine, then the working class must be organized to fight for political power. We urge teachers in Seattle, throughout Washington and other states to contact the Socialist Equality Party to build the leadership necessary for this struggle.



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