

Five thousand teachers in Seattle, Washington go on strike

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10 September 2015

On Wednesday morning, the scheduled start of the school year, about 5,000 teachers and support staff in Seattle, Washington went on strike over issues of stagnant wages and increasing class sizes.

Immediately the school board announced that it would seek a court injunction to end the strike, saying “A strike for any reason by District teachers or other personnel is harmful and damaging to the District, our students, and our community.” If the strike is found illegal the union will call another vote to determine whether the strike should continue.

This is the first contract-related strike by Seattle teachers since 1985 and is a sign of growing anger over the bipartisan attack on teachers and public education carried out by both Republicans and Democrats. At the same time, the union organizing the strike—the Seattle Education Association, part of the National Education Association—is seeking to prevent the struggle from developing into a political conflict with the Democrats and the Obama administration.

The teachers and staff in Seattle are upset with the stagnant wages and test-based teacher evaluations that were pushed through in the last two contracts. The three-year contract signed in 2010 included only one percent raises in two out of three years. The two-year contract in 2013 included 2 and 2.5 percent raises in the years it covered.

Cost of living increases which had been incorporated into teacher pay at the state level have been eliminated over the past six years. As inflation since 2010 has cut teachers’ wages by at least 8.6 percent, this means that teachers have faced a net pay cut of at least two percent. Both the contracts in 2010 and in 2013 increased the role of standardized testing in teacher evaluations and increased the hours teachers were required to work.

Teachers are now seeking to break through the combination of overwork and stagnant pay. They have demanded a six percent yearly raise and a return of cost of living increases, while the district has responded with an offer of 3 percent a year.

Other issues in the contract include increasing recess time for students, which at some schools is a mere 15 minutes, and improving staffing levels for special education. Teachers across the state are facing the same issues. Educators in the Pasco School District in Southeast Washington voted to continue their strike that began last week, despite a court injunction ordering a return to work.

Driving the teachers is not just concern over their own pay and benefits, but the fate of public education as a whole.

Education in Washington has faced devastating cuts since the 2008 recession, and public education has been chronically underfunded. The state supreme court recently found the state legislature in contempt for failing to “make ample provision for the education of all children residing [in Washington],” which the state constitution lists as the state’s “paramount duty.”

This criminal underfunding of education has been intensified under the current Democratic Governor, Jay Inslee, who also delayed implementation of a voter initiative to reduce class sizes in K-12 education. While Inslee claims that there is no money to better fund education, he approved a \$9 billion subsidy to Boeing in 2013.

Nationwide, the Obama administration has spearheaded the attack on public schools, which took off where its Republican predecessor left off. The Race to the Top program has used standardized testing as a bludgeon to replace public schools with charters. The administration has further starved cities and states of

funds while spending trillions to bail out Wall Street. District after district throughout the country has carried out school closures, mass layoffs, the destruction of programs like art and music, as well as a sharp increase in arbitrary test-based standards.

Last year, the federal government cut \$40 million in subsidies to Washington schools because they did not base enough of teacher evaluations on student test scores.

The trade unions have backed the Democrats to the hilt in this attack, only seeking to maintain their own role in determining which schools are closed and their position in the characterization of public schools.

To contain and divert growing anger among teachers, the Washington Education Association (WEA) called disjointed one-day strikes scattered across the state in April and May. These stunts were called in order to let off steam and allow the union bureaucrats to pose as militant while they prepared the next sellout contract.

As part of the National Education Association, the SEA backed Obama's re-election in 2012, long after his attack on public schools had begun. Each election season, the NEA funnels millions of dollars from dues into the Democratic Party.

The unions are aided in this by a series of "radical" union activists like the Social Equality Educators (SEE) in the SEA. Ian Golash, an activist in the International Socialist Organization (ISO)-backed SEE, stated "We're following the example of Chicago in showing people how you fight back." Seattle teachers should take this as a warning that ISO activists are looking to reprise the same betrayal they carried out during the 2012 strike.

The chiefly ISO-led Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) called the strike in 2012 with the aim of containing opposition and leveraging teachers to cement their own relationship with Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel. The supposed scions of "social justice unionism" forced an end to the strike after one week, before it could develop into a direct political confrontation with Obama's former Chief of Staff, Emanuel, and the White House itself.

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

the layoff of 3,500 teachers and other school employees within a year.

This year, Chicago schools began without enough money in the budget to finish the year. Emmanuel has proposed an additional 500 layoffs on top of the 1,400 announced at the beginning of the year, and the response of CTU vice president and ISO member Jesse Sharkey was to call on Emmanuel to implement the layoffs immediately, saying "If you lay us off now, we can look for new jobs. If you let us go in the middle of the year, that's our livelihood."

There is a growing opposition throughout the United States to the unending demands for cuts and attacks on all the rights of the working class, including public education. Contracts for hundreds of thousands of autoworkers, steelworkers, communication workers, as well as teachers across the country, have either expired or are about to expire. The aim of the unions and their promoters has been to keep their struggles isolated and prevent them from developing into a political struggle against the Democratic Party and the capitalist system that it defends.



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