Strike by Seattle teachers continues through third day

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The strike of 5,000 teachers and staff in Seattle, Washington finished its third day Friday. On Thursday negotiators met briefly with state mediators, but no negotiations are currently scheduled between the Seattle Education Association (SEA) and Seattle Public Schools. Although the School Board threatened to petition the courts to declare the strike illegal, they have not yet done so.

The strike, which began last Wednesday, is the first in Seattle since 1985, and is centered on stagnant wages, understaffing, testing and teacher evaluations.

Including inflation, teachers have seen their real wages decline by 2 percent over the past five years. Concurrently, the amount of time teachers have been required to work has increased. Contract negotiations this year included a demand by the school board for teachers to work an additional 20 minutes each day without extra pay.

Seattle as a whole has seen a sharp rise in the cost of living as a result of growth of the tech industry. Over the past year the median price of single-family houses in Seattle rose 15 percent to $575,000. The median rental price as of last July was $2,354 a month. This has had a sharp impact on teachers whose real salaries have declined. But educators are also striking over the deteriorating quality of education.

One teacher commented online “It’s not all about $, there’s also integrity. Test scores should not be tied to evaluations. Recess should not be negotiable. Testing and learning how to take tests are taking up weeks of time. Asking teachers to work an additional 30 minutes without instructional assistants sets up our Special Ed and ELL [English Language Learner] students for 30 minutes of frustration.”

The issues confronting Seattle teachers and staff are part of a broader attack on education that has been spearheaded by the Obama administration. In district after district, arbitrary standardized test benchmarks have been used to close schools, fire teachers and replace public schools with privately run charter schools.

The US Department of Education cut subsidies specifically to Washington State because it wants to implement test based teacher evaluations statewide instead of on a district level. The federal attack on public education is backed by the Democrats and Republicans at the state and local levels. Washington’s Democratic Governor, Jay Inslee, approved budgets that suspended the teachers’ cost of living increases over the past six years.

In March of this year, the Republican majority state senate approved a bill requiring student test based teacher evaluations and a similar bill is before the Democratic majority state House of Representatives. Teachers in Seattle will be unable to solve the problems in their district outside of a political fight against these forces.

The unions seek to prevent any political struggle on these issues by keeping all strikes limited and isolated.

One Seattle parent raised a crucial question about the union and the strike. “Our family has experienced many strikes and several layoffs, especially when the local industry that employed my husband when we were first married all but shut down (the shipyards). My question is, where is the union? Shouldn’t the dues they have been paying have been going into a strike fund? If they haven’t walked the picket line for 30 years, the fund should be quite large by now.”

The teachers will receive absolutely no strike pay, in fact the SEA’s latest strike newsletter suggests that teachers take out loans if they need financial assistance during the strike.

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