

Seattle teachers continue strike

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Despite a resumption of negotiations over the weekend, teachers in Seattle remained on strike over wages, teacher evaluations and student testing. The walkout by 5,000 teachers, members of the Seattle Education Association (SEA), began last Wednesday and affects 53,000 students in the Seattle Public Schools (SPS). The school year was scheduled to begin September 9, and according to an SPS spokesperson the strike is costing the district \$100,000 a day.

The SEA is calling for a 4.75 percent wage increase in the first year and a 5 percent wage increase in the second year of a two-year contract. The union is also asking for a 4.8 percent cost-of-living raise, something that has been agreed to by the state. That is down from a 15.3 percent cost-of-living raise initially sought by the union.

Over the past five years, Seattle teachers have seen an effective 2 percent cut in wages due to inflation. At the same time, housing costs have been skyrocketing in Seattle, with the median rental price reaching \$2,354 a month, amounting to about two-thirds of a starting teacher's salary of \$44,000 a year.

Teachers are also striking over issues of recess length, which is as little as 15 minutes at some schools, and the use of student test scores in punitive teacher evaluations. Negotiators between the SEA and SPS resumed talks on Sunday, with both sides reportedly giving ground on wages. The school district stated it offered an unspecified amount of money in exchange for an extra 20 minutes of daily work from teachers. For its part, the union reduced its wage demands from 10.5 percent over two years to 9.75 percent over the same period.

The issues facing teachers in Seattle are part of a broader attack on teachers across the state and nationwide. Teachers in the Kelso School District in Southwest Washington state are being offered a mere 1.7 percent raise over three years. The Kelso Education

Association (KEA) held a strike vote Monday evening.

In district after district across the United States, teachers are facing declining real wages and the use of arbitrary, standardized test benchmarks to close schools, fire teachers, and shift students into privately run charter schools. School budgets have been devastated by years of cuts following the 2008 economic crisis where banks got trillions of dollars in bailouts and low-interest loans from the Democrats and Republicans paid for by cuts to public services like education.

Policies promoting charter schools and the scapegoating of teachers were started under the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" program and intensified under Obama's "Race to the Top" initiative. This is behind the hard line taken by school districts across the United States as they compete for ever scarcer federal dollars from Washington.

For their part, the unions are seeking to keep any strikes that do erupt limited to local and isolated actions. Shortly after the Seattle teachers walked out, the Pasco Education Association (PEA) in Southeast Washington announced a tentative deal in a strike involving 1,160 teachers who had been on the picket line since September 1. The teachers had been striking over wages and curriculum issues and held a ratification vote Monday.

Teachers in Pasco faced victimization by the courts, with a county judge declaring their strike illegal last Friday and fining the union \$2,000 for each day the strike continued retroactive to September 8. The judge has also levied fines of \$250 a day on the PEA president and two other union officials. That same day the school district issued a statement saying teachers might not be paid or receive benefits for the month of September due to the strike. Neither the teachers in Pasco nor the striking teachers in Seattle receive strike benefits.

The National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers' union and the largest union in the nation to endorse Obama's reelection campaign in 2012, is carrying out a deliberate policy of isolating teachers and allowing the imposition of concessions district by district. The Seattle walkout takes place at a time when teachers in major school districts across the United States, from Pittsburgh to Detroit to Chicago—members of the American Federation of Teachers—are working without contracts.

Covering up for the treacherous role of the teachers' unions are a host of pseudo-left groups, in the first place the International Socialist Organization and its newspaper *Socialist Worker*, which is heavily involved in the Seattle teachers' strike. Their role has been to divert teachers from considering the political issues raised by the strike, in the first place the NEA's alliance with the Democratic Party, and injecting the poison of racial politics. Along these lines the ISO is promoting the call of the SEA for "race equity teams" in every school.

While racial disparities exist, these are a product of the massive social inequality created by the capitalist system and the savage attack on the working class carried out by both big business parties over the last three-and-a-half decades. A serious fight against poverty, inequality and the destruction of public education requires a political struggle against Wall Street and its two political parties, the Republicans and Democrats.

However, the ISO is opposed to such a struggle. In an interview posted on *Socialist Worker*, Jonathan Knapp, president of the SEA, dismissed the significance of the injunction imposed against Pasco teachers, calling it a distraction. "Every contract dispute is settled at the bargaining table," he said, "That's where this one will be settled. It's about the issues we're talking about. It's not about court orders. It's like theater."

Far from being a distraction, the court attack on Pasco teachers is a direct warning to striking Seattle teachers of the kind of attacks being prepared. The Seattle School Board has already threatened to take the union into court to get the walkout declared illegal. However, the alliance of the teachers' unions with the Democratic Party precludes any kind of mobilization of teachers against the threat to their jobs and working

conditions and the destruction of public education in general. This is because the Obama administration is spearheading the attack on teachers under the guise of "school reform."

If the courts have not already intervened in Seattle it is only because school authorities and the Democratic city administration are relying on the SEA and its pseudo-left allies to contain and betray the strike. Indeed, in the 2012 Chicago teachers strike the ISO—whose leading member Jesse Sharkey is the vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union—played the key role in shutting down the strike before it could develop into a direct confrontation with the Democrats and the Obama administration. The sellout of the strike paved the way for mass school closures by Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the layoff of thousands of teachers.

In the 2014 elections, the NEA spent \$30 million on campaign donations, largely to the Democrats. The current president of the NEA, Lily Eskelson García, has spoken effusively in support of Obama and encouraged illusions in Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who is widely despised among educators for his role in the promotion of charter schools.

In fact, Garcia praised the 2016 federal budget proposed by Obama, which included increased military spending and corporate tax cuts. She wrote, "The smart and pragmatic priorities the president outlined in his budget are the right ones for American families."



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