# Seattle teachers union calls off strike

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**16 September 2015**

The Seattle Education Association (SEA) and Seattle Public Schools (SPS) announced a tentative contract on Tuesday. Teachers in Seattle have been on strike since September 9 to demand increased wages and oppose the expansion of standardized tests and teacher evaluations.

The union ordered the teachers to return to work Wednesday morning without having seen or voted on the terms of the agreement and despite growing public support for their struggle. SEA President Jonathan Knapp announced the deal at a press conference Tuesday morning without giving any details. The union's executive board was expected to approve the agreement.

Schools are set to reopen Thursday and a ratification vote on the contract is slated for this weekend.

The teachers have seen an outpouring of support from the community. This has only increased the determination of the union to end the strike quickly to prevent it from becoming a focal point for broader anger over the attacks on education that are being carried out by both big business parties.

On Tuesday, several hundred parents and students marched to the school district headquarters in support of the strike. Several spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the wider issues involved in the strike.

One parent, Amy Hamblim, explained, "We are out here to support the teachers. Across the country, for decades, our teachers have been expected to work above the call of duty for unfair pay and it's time for everyone to pull together for our community schools."

Donovan Deakin, a parent, pointed to several of the political issues in the strike. "I have a first grader and she should be in school today," he said. "Education is paramount to democracy and restoring equality. I am very angry that SPS waited until the last minute to negotiate the terms of the contract. The superintendent and the SPS board need to step up. I also blame the Washington State legislature for not upholding its constitutional obligation by failing to fund and support our schools."

Since August 13, the Washington State Supreme Court has levied daily fines on the state legislature for failing to sufficiently fund education. The state constitution calls education the "paramount" duty of the state government.

"In Seattle," Deakin continued, "we value education. It is central for our democracy. That is why tax levies for schools have always passed."

Statewide, voters in Washington have repeatedly expressed their desire to increase education funding in opposition to cutbacks imposed by both the Democrats and Republicans. In 2014, voters approved initiative 1351, which would limit class sizes to 25 or less based on grade level. Carrying out the voters' decision would necessitate the hiring of 15,000 new teachers statewide.

Voters also approved initiative 732 in 2000, which mandated cost-of-living adjustments for teachers. The Democratic governor, Jay Inslee, has approved budgets for the past six years that suspend the cost-of-living increase. He has also delayed implementation of the mandate for reduced class sizes.

The attack on education is spearheaded at the national level by the Obama administration. After the 2008 economic crisis, the banks were bailed out with trillions of dollars in public funds at the expense of social services such as education. The administration spearheaded the drive, under its "Race to the Top" program, to compel underfunded schools to expand standardized testing and teacher evaluations in order to remove senior teachers and brand schools in working class areas as failing, so they could be replaced by privately run charter schools.

Any genuine struggle to defend education would immediately run into political opposition from the Democratic Party, with which the SEA is allied.

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The union has sought to keep its members isolated from other school districts in Washington and from public sentiment opposed to the attacks on educators. Despite the state- and nation-wide issues confronting every school, the Washington Education Association, the state parent organization of the city union locals, has kept contract negotiations entirely on a district-by-district basis.

In southwest Washington, the Kelso Education Association has kept its members working without a contract since June 30. Last Monday, teachers in that district voted to strike beginning on Wednesday. Teachers in Pasco, Washington approved a new contract on Tuesday, ending their two-week strike. The local courts had declared the Pasco strike illegal and were fining the union $2,000 a day as long as the walkout continued.

A critical role in isolating and betraying the teachers has been played by pseudo-left organizations such as Socialist Alternative, whose member Kshama Sawant is a city councillor in Seattle, and the International Socialist Organization (ISO), whose member Jesse Hagopian is a leading member of the SEA. The two groups formed the Coalition for the Schools Seattle Deserves (CSSD) as their front organization for the strike.

These organizations explicitly tell workers to place their faith in union bureaucrats and Democratic politicians. Sawant has voiced occasional criticisms of the Democrats while working closely with the Democratic Party and telling workers it can be shifted to the left.

Sawant has praised the leadership of the SEA by name, including President Knapp and Vice President Phyllis Campano. A meeting last Thursday of the CSSD featured as a speaker Karen Strickland, the president of the American Federation of Teachers of Washington state, the other major teachers' union.

Both Sawant and Hagopian appeared on the "Democracy Now!" cable television program to speak about the strike. Sawant praised the Democratic-dominated City Council for passing a meaningless resolution requesting that the governor and state legislator fund education.

At the beginning of the strike, Sawant issued a joint statement with two Democrats on the City Council thanking the school board for their work and politely requesting that they not seek a court injunction against the walkout. No criticism was raised of the court decision against the Pasco teachers.

The ISO's web site *SocialistWorker* carried a flattering interview with Knapp, who dismissed the court ruling against the Pasco teachers as a "distraction." He added, "This happens in teachers' strikes everywhere. Sooner or later, the district will go to a judge and ask for a temporary restraining order to send everyone back… It's like theater."

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