

Seattle teachers face sellout contract

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Teachers in Seattle, Washington will be voting on a new contract this Sunday after the Seattle Education Association (SEA) capitulated on wages and reached a tentative agreement with Seattle Public Schools (SPS) last Tuesday. Union leaders voted to end the strike Tuesday afternoon, and since then teachers have been working without a contract.

The strike that began on September 9 involved 5,000 teachers and support staff and delayed the beginning of the school year for 53,000 students in Washington state's largest school district. It received significant support from parents, students and workers across the city who have regularly voted to increase public school funding.

Although most details of the proposed contract have not been made public, it has all the hallmarks of a sellout, including an abandonment of wage demands, toothless equity teams and changes to teacher evaluations that would be erased by pending state legislation.

On wages, the tentative agreement includes 9.5 percent in raises spread out over three years in addition to the state mandated cost of living adjustments (COLA). This is almost exactly the 9.2 percent that SPS offered at the beginning of the strike and roughly half the 6 percent each year that the union called for in its public posturing.

Seattle teachers have not had their state-mandated COLA in six years and experienced an effective two percent pay cut over the past five years as inflation more than erased their meager raises at the local level. This has been combined with soaring housing costs in Seattle, leaving many teachers struggling to make a living.

Just in the last year, median home prices surged 15 percent in Seattle to \$575,000. Median monthly rental costs were \$2,400 a month as of last July. This amounts to two-thirds of the total pay for a starting teacher's

salary of \$44,000 a year.

The union has tried to cover up its capitulation by emphasizing ostensible gains in "reasonable testing," "fair teacher and staff evaluations," and the creation of "race and equity teams" at 30 of the district's 91 schools. There is no reason to expect any improvement in work conditions or quality of education from these measures.

Seattle public schools have a history of discriminatory punishments, with black students four times as likely to be suspended as white students, but this is driven by deep underlying social inequality. The poverty rate for African Americans in Seattle was 35 percent in 2010, compared to 11 percent for the white population. The union's demand for "equity teams" is aimed at obscuring the fundamental class issues and promoting identity politics as part of its political alliance with the Democratic Party.

The testing standards are set at the federal and state level, and the impact of the contract with the SPS on them will be minimal. Although the union claims to have removed the use of test scores from teacher evaluations, the Washington State Senate passed a bill in March mandating the use of test scores on statewide tests as part of teacher evaluations. A similar bill is currently before the state house. Given the support of the Obama administration for test-based evaluations, it is likely to pass, eliminating any gains the union claims on this point.

These measures are being used by the union leaders as a smokescreen for their betrayal of the strike. Throughout the strike, SEA officials tried to keep teachers isolated from educators in other school districts and subordinate them to Democratic Party officials.

Despite the common issues confronting teachers in every district, the parent organization of the SEA, the Washington Educators Association, kept every struggle

separate and was supported in this by the local bureaucrats. Even when the union local in Pasco was being fined \$2,000 a day during their earlier two-week strike, SEA President Jonathan Knapp argued that it had no relevance to the Seattle teachers.

Moreover, as part of the National Education Association, the SEA has poured dues money into Democratic politicians including those pushing education “reform.” Under the Obama administration, public schools have been chronically underfunded, subjected to arbitrary standardized test benchmarks, and steadily replaced with privately run charter schools.

A critical role in isolating the Seattle teachers and keeping the anger of teachers throughout the country within the framework of the Democratic Party has been played by pseudo-left organizations like the International Socialist Organization and Socialist Alternative, both of which are very active in the SEA. They have claimed throughout that teachers can defend their interests within the framework of the SEA and by making appeals to Democratic Party politicians.

The union called the strike in order to let educators blow off steam after years of worsening conditions, without actually changing anything. The widespread community support for the strike showed the potential for a serious struggle in defense of education, but that will require a break with the union and a fight against both of the big-business parties.



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