

Seattle teachers union pushes through sellout contract

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A general membership meeting of the Seattle Education Association (SEA) voted on Sunday to accept the sellout contract recommended by the union, with a notable minority opposing. The vote officially ended the strike of the 5,000 teachers in Seattle Public Schools (SPS), which began September 9 and was suspended by the union a week later on September 16.

The contract includes a retreat on wage demands, in addition to changes in standardized testing practices and teacher evaluations that have not yet been made public. Other measures include the lowering of student-to-teacher ratios in preschool and some special education programs, while raising them in others.

Three thousand school district workers attended the meeting. The deal was approved by 83 percent of teachers, 87 percent of paraprofessionals, and 96 percent of office professionals. The nearly one in five teachers who opposed the contract represent a growing opposition to the stagnant wages and declining living standards being imposed on educators as part of education “reform.”

Over the past five years district workers have seen their effective pay decline by 2 percent as inflation more than ate up their sparse raises in the last two contracts. It has been six years since educators received their state mandated yearly cost-of-living adjustment (COLA).

At the same time, housing prices have skyrocketed in the Seattle area, with median rental prices at \$2,400 a month, enough to take up two-thirds of a new teacher’s salary. Median home prices have also risen 15 percent over the past year to \$575,000.

The three-year contract differs in wages by 0.3 percent from that offered by SPS at the beginning of the strike. Under the accepted deal district workers will receive raises of 3 percent the first year, then 2 percent

and 4.5 percent the following years. The state-funded COLA will also resume and should amount to 4.8 percent in the first two years of the contract. This keeps teachers’ salaries below what they would be if they had received the standard COLA over their last two contracts.

The union has tried to cover over its capitulation on wages by promoting changes in the contract on standardized testing that are incapable of significantly changing the high-stakes testing environment in schools. The tests students take are set at the state and federal level and the impact of the contract with SPS will be minimal.

The union has also claimed that the contract will remove 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 and likely to pass. The US Department of Education cut subsidies to public schools in the state this year precisely to pressure the state to base teacher evaluations on standardized test results.

With no significant impact, these measures in the contract serve only as a cover for the union cave-in on wages. The nature of the contract is amply demonstrated by the union’s anti-democratic method of calling off the strike and sending its membership back to work—without a contract and before they had a chance to vote on it.

From the beginning the union has sought to keep the strike local and ineffective. Despite the common issues confronting schools across the state, the parent organization of the SEA, the Washington Education Association, has intentionally kept strikes isolated and vulnerable to provocations.

Seattle was the second school district in Washington state to go on strike at the beginning of this school year. The first was Pasco, in Southeast Washington, and the third was in Kelso, in Southwest Washington.

Pasco teachers began their strike on September 1 and then voted to continue it after the Franklin County Superior Court declared the strike illegal and fined the union \$2,000 a day until it called off the strike. Pasco teachers ratified a new contract on September 13.

In Kelso the educators struck on September 16, the very day the SEA suspended its strike. Kelso teachers had been working since June 30 without a contract and are seeking equal wages with teachers in the adjoining city of Longview and more paid days outside the classroom for professional development and prep time. Last Friday, a Cowlitz County district court declared the Kelso strike illegal and ordered teachers to return to work by Tuesday.

From the national to the local level, it is the policy of union officials to try to constrain workers' indignation over the nationwide attack on education to entirely local issues, as a means of subordinating them to the Democratic Party and Obama administration, which has been spearheading education "reform."

The president of the SEA, Jonathan Knapp, encouraged Seattle teachers to ignore the court injunction in Pasco and focus on the negotiating table locally. Anyone interested in helping the strike, he said, should bring food to the picket lines. "Once we get to this point in a labor action," said Knapp, "It's about concrete actions."

The union officials who isolate and sell out these strikes are supported by pseudo-left organizations like Socialist Alternative. These organizations want to foster the illusions in workers that the same politicians that have been carrying out the assault on education can be "pressured to the left."

Since the strike began, Seattle City Councilor Kshama Sawant, a member of Socialist Alternative, has issued a joint statement with two other Democrats on the city council, held a joint meeting with the president of the American Federation of Teachers Washington, praised Knapp by name, and claimed that an empty city council resolution in support of the teachers proved that the Democrats "can make a huge shift."

Since the union told teachers to return to work without a contract, Sawant has made no further official

statements.



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