

Three thousand Pittsburgh schoolworkers vote on strike

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Nearly 3,000 teachers, paraprofessionals and technical/clerical workers working for the Pittsburgh Public Schools are taking a mail-in strike vote. There has not been a strike in the city since the 1975-76 school year, over 40 years ago.

The teachers and the other school employees have been working without a contract since June 30, 2017. Their last contract expired in June 2015. For two years they have worked under a contract extension.

The vote, which does not mandate a strike but merely authorizes the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) to call one, will be counted on Monday. The union's executive board will reportedly hold a meeting on Wednesday to review the results. The PFT has stated that it doesn't want to call a strike and that it is hoping that the vote will get the Pittsburgh School Board to negotiate with the union.

There is growing anger among teachers at the massive budget cuts which have been destroying education in Pittsburgh and throughout Pennsylvania.

"This is ridiculous," said one elementary teacher. "They say they care about the students, but our classes are overcrowded. We don't have the teaching support and many art and music programs are still cut.

"We were told to vote for [Pennsylvania Governor Tom] Wolf, but we still don't have the money we need. They can give all these tax cuts for the rich, but we need money for the students."

Pittsburgh schools are functioning at only 88 percent of the state funding level they received before draconian cuts were made on the state level to funding public education in 2011. There are 24,000 students in the Pittsburgh district; 65 percent are considered economically disadvantaged.

In 2011, then-governor Republican Tom Corbett carried out a massive \$1 billion cut in funding for

public K-12 education and \$500 million from higher education. The K-12 cuts forced school districts across the state to eliminate classes, programs and schools. Thousands of teachers were laid off.

Philadelphia, the state's largest and most impoverished school district, was cut by nearly \$500 per student. Pittsburgh, the state's second largest school district, had its funding cut by over \$380 per student.

These cuts were pushed by the politicians as necessary as the result of the economic crisis caused by the Wall Street bankers.

The current governor, Democrat Tom Wolf, with the strong backing of both the American Federation of Teachers-Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania State Education Association, won the election in 2014 with the promise to restore the cuts to public education made by his predecessors.

However, since taking office Wolf has only partially restored the cuts and Pittsburgh is still \$88 million a year below 2010 state funding levels.

Three days ago, the Wolf administration announced his new budget proposal for 2018-19 that continues the inadequate funding for public education. The budget would increase public education funding by only \$100 million, bringing state support to just above the 2010 levels for the first time. However, even this inadequate increase may be offset by the ending of a \$250 million block grant to local school districts. While the Wolf budget includes the block grant, it is very likely that both it and \$100 million increase will be eliminated during negotiations over the next few months.

Both the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers and the Pennsylvania State Education Association continue to support Wolf.

Pittsburgh Mayor, Democrat William Peduto, who

has no direct role in the negotiations, has issued a statement calling upon the school superintendent to negotiate with the teachers and allow him and the Allegheny County Executive to act as mediators. While posing as a friend of the teachers, the Peduto administration has in fact given massive tax breaks to property developers within the city, which have added to the deficits of both the city government and the school board.

If a strike is called the union must give the school board a 48-hour notice and it will be limited to only a few days. State law requires that any strike by school employees cannot prevent students from receiving 180 days of classes by June. Neither the AFT-Pennsylvania nor the PSEA have challenged the law. The union represents 2,400 teachers, 565 paraprofessionals and 20 technical-clerical employees.

Meanwhile, the Greencastle-Antrim Education Association has set an April 4 strike date, after nearly a year of failed negotiations. The union, representing 180 teachers in the south-central part of Pennsylvania, set a date nearly two months in the future in the hopes of avoiding any action. Meanwhile, teachers have been working on a contract extension since September, as both mediation and a fact-finding report have not led to a settlement. Both teacher salaries and proposed cuts in health care benefits are at issue. The local school board also blamed the state budget cuts for putting the schools in an untenable position.



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