

Teachers across Washington state prepare to strike over wages and conditions

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After enduring years of stagnant wages and rising enrollment, teachers and support staff in two districts in the US state of Washington have gone out on strike. School workers throughout most of the state have overwhelmingly authorized strikes if their demands for higher pay and smaller class sizes are not met.

Since May, many school boards in the state have been engaged in negotiations with teacher and support staff unions—almost all affiliates of the Washington Education Association (WEA), the state affiliate of the National Education Association—on contracts for the school year starting in September. The length of teacher contracts is staggered throughout the state to prevent the emergence of unified struggle of school workers statewide for better wages and conditions.

The unions are working to contain the anger of teachers and isolate and suppress any strikes that do break out. In the teachers' strikes earlier this year—including in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona—the unions worked to shut down opposition and prevent it from developing into a broader movement of teachers and the entire working class.

This year, contracts ended for Seattle, and school workers in most of the state are preparing to strike if their demands are not met. While demands vary from district to district, they generally include the demand that some of the additional education funding mandated by the state Supreme Court be used to provide more training, smaller class sizes, and long-overdue wage increases of at least 15 percent and 37 percent for teachers and support staff, respectively.

In a 2012 ruling, the Washington Supreme Court ruled in favor of parents who sued the state on behalf of their children enrolled in public schools in the state, arguing that the state was failing to adequately fund K-12 public education and was thereby violating the

state's constitution. The Washington constitution dictates that child education shall be the "highest priority" of the state.

After the state proved unwilling to adequately fund K-12 education, the Court made the unprecedented move of holding the state in contempt. The ongoing saga has forced the state to allocate an additional \$7.3 billion in education funding this year at the expense of social programs. Washington has one of the nation's most regressive tax structure and a two-thirds majority requirement for new taxes. The state is home to the world's two richest people, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates.

So far, about 40 contracts have been agreed on and another 200 remain outstanding. Teachers in Woodland purportedly received a 22.82 percent increase in base salary.

Teachers in Longview went on strike Thursday after rejecting an insulting pay offer of 6.9 percent, while teachers in Battle Ground, Washougal, and Vancouver overwhelmingly approved strike action by more than 90 percent after similar intransigence on the part of their respective school boards.

Democrat-controlled Washington, like more conservative states such as West Virginia, has a reactionary law that makes it illegal for public employees to strike.

Strike authorization votes, which have been repeated across much of the state, have left the WEA and its local affiliates scrambling for a means of suppressing the emerging radicalism of teachers and averting a strike.

Longview Education Association president Ray Clift told reporters Thursday: "I hope they recognize our first decision was to try to keep this away from our students as much as we possibly can, hence the reason

that we started on this in-service day. We want the district to know. We hope it doesn't lean over into the school year, but that will be the district's choice."

Meanwhile, Seattle teachers are demanding pay competitive with teacher pay elsewhere and commensurate with the high cost of living in the city. Most teachers who work for Seattle Public Schools cannot afford to live in the city, with a starting pay of \$37,039 for certified teachers. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, anyone earning less than \$50,400 in the city last year was considered "low-income."

The growth of opposition among teachers in Washington is part of a broader movement of teachers to demand better pay, working conditions and funding for public education throughout the country. The unions are seeking to divert sentiment for a united struggle, as they did in the strikes that erupted earlier in the year.

If they are to succeed, teachers and support staff in Washington must assimilate the lessons of the teacher revolt last spring and take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands of the trade union apparatus. They must form rank-and-file committees to coordinate with United Postal Service workers, Amazon workers, public-sector workers and other sections of the working class.



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