

Teachers across Washington state demand strike action and big pay increases

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27 August 2018

Teachers across the northwestern US state of Washington are voting overwhelmingly for strike action, as thousands of educators demand double-digit pay increases before the start of school. In their fight to reverse years of budget cuts, Washington teachers are giving voice to the anger and determination of educators and all workers across the US.

The threat of a statewide teachers strike in Washington takes place under conditions of growing anger among workers throughout the US and an unprecedented crisis within the ruling elite. Conditions are developing for a connection between educators and the hundreds of thousands of workers whose contracts have or will soon expire, including workers at United Parcel Service, the United States Postal Service and in steel, telecom and other industries. Seattle-area construction workers are already on strike .

The principal obstacle to a united action of workers is the trade union apparatus, which is working to prevent strike action or isolate and shut down struggles when they do break out.

Last Thursday, Longview educators were the first members of the Washington Education Association (WEA) to take strike action. About 400 educators and their supporters rallied outside the district offices demonstrating widespread support for the strike.

All teacher contracts in the state have been opened as a result of the state Supreme Court decision known as McCleary, the product of a 2012 lawsuit by parents outraged over attacks on public education. While about 40 school districts have settled—some for pay increases reportedly as high as 25–35 percent—more than 200 have so far refused to meet the demands of teachers. This includes Seattle, the largest district.

Rallies and strike votes have been held in Highline, Centralia, Evergreen, Kent, Battle Ground, Washougal, Hockinson, Vancouver and Ridgefield, with more

scheduled this week. Tacoma, the third largest district, has offered teachers an insulting 3.1 percent increase, as have a number of other districts. As a result of McCleary and the depth of the cuts imposed on Washington schools, the legislature was compelled to allocate \$7.3 billion to the school system last year. Another \$1 billion was added this year earmarked for teacher salaries.

The pay gap between Washington teachers and other similarly-educated workers is the sixth worst in the US, with educators making 32 percent less than other college graduates in the state. Moreover, the cost of housing in the state of Washington is extremely high, making it increasingly impossible for teachers to live in the districts where they teach.

A call for a “statewide walkout to support ALL districts” and/or a demonstration at the state capitol in Olympia on Labor Day has sparked great interest on social media.

While state legislators have failed to fund schools, the state is awash with money. It is the home to the world’s two richest people, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos (net worth \$150 billion) and Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates (\$91 billion). Its largest private employer by far is the commercial jet and military contractor Boeing, which saw its profits double last year.

In 2013, the state legislature handed Boeing an estimated \$8.7 billion tax windfall, the largest state tax break in US history.

The main concern of Democratic Governor Jay Inslee, who signed the deal, and his colleagues in the legislature was, and continues to be, Boeing, Amazon and other major corporations, not children. The same tax breaks for Boeing were extended in 2017, with bipartisan support, to all manufacturers in the state, while property taxes were raised on workers’ homes.

In demanding decent wages, Washington educators are expressing not only their own pent-up anger, but that of

educators, school workers and parents across the US suffering the effects of a bipartisan policy of defunding and privatizing education on a national level. McClery may have opened the floodgates, but Washington teachers are taking their place within a broad-based radicalization of workers nationally and internationally.

Some 26,000 Los Angeles teachers are presently working without a contract and voting on strike action. North Carolina educators rallied last Friday at the state capitol demanding adequate funding for schools and are organizing town halls around the state to mobilize support. Alaskan teachers rallied last week during their first day of striking, protesting their second year of working without a contract. Earlier this month, thousands of teachers in Puerto Rico staged a one-day strike to oppose plans to close nearly a third of the schools on the hurricane-ravaged US territory.

A decade since the global financial crash, teacher strikes have erupted internationally, with mass strikes this year in Mexico, Argentina, Slovenia, Bangladesh, the United Kingdom and India.

The teachers unions, politically aligned with the Democratic Party, are doing everything they can to block the development of a national and international struggle of educators. Just as the National Association of Education (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) worked to suppress, limit and sell out the statewide teacher strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona last spring, the NEA is trying to quash the fight in Washington state.

Under extreme pressure from teachers, the WEA has “recommended” 15 percent wage increases for certified teachers and 36.7 percent increases to support professionals, while desperately trying to keep a lid on teachers’ anger. Even in the wake of a miniscule 3.1 percent offer and an overwhelming strike vote, for example, Kent Education Association President Christie Padilla stated, “We absolutely do not want to strike.” If the NEA were a fighting organization, rather than a strike-breaking one, it would have already called a statewide strike.

The fight to reverse the bipartisan national policy of gutting public education while funneling massive tax cuts to the wealthy requires a new perspective, both organizationally and politically. The NEA and AFT have supported the pro-privatization, anti-public school agenda pursued by both Democrats and Republicans because they are advocates of capitalism, an outlook that has richly rewarded their upper echelons.

Assisting the unions in suppressing the class struggle are groups like the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the Democratic Socialists of America. Seattle teacher and ISO member Jesse Hagopian is a spokesman for these organizations, which are part of the union apparatus and have secured leading positions in several teachers unions. The ISO echoes the WEA’s call for a grossly inadequate 15 percent increase and even calls a 13 percent bump “a victory.”

The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* urges workers to break the stranglehold of the corrupt anti-working class unions by forming rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. These committees, drawn from schools and neighborhoods, should draw up demands as the basis for a nationwide strike, bringing together educators, parents, students and all sections of the working class.

The claim promoted by both the Democrats and Republicans that there is no money to adequately fund education is a lie, designed to camouflage the theft of social resources by the wealthy. The struggle by teachers poses directly the question of which class holds power and decides how society’s resources are allocated: the working class, which produces all the wealth in society through its labor, or by the corporate and financial oligarchy.

The fortunes of Bezos, Gates and their Wall Street cronies must be expropriated and used to provide good-paying jobs, education, health care and housing for all. Boeing, along with the rest of the imperialist war machine, must be transformed into a publicly owned utility and devoted to peaceful and socially useful production such as rebuilding the crumbling infrastructure, including the construction of high-tech, modern schools in every community.

The defense of public education has become a revolutionary demand because it requires a struggle against the entire capitalist economic and political set up. We urge teachers to contact the Socialist Equality Party and take up the fight for socialism.



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