

# More Washington state teachers strike as unions seek to contain struggle

Alec Andersen  
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Teachers in the southwestern Washington districts of Washougal and Evergreen will begin strike action Tuesday as their local unions failed to reach a deal that could be sold to their memberships. Other districts in the area are set to follow suit Wednesday if no deal is struck.

Teachers and support staff across the state are demanding significant increases in pay. Years of underfunding have eroded school workers' wages in a state that has experienced astronomical growth in the cost of living.

Evergreen and Washougal teachers will begin the school year on strike Tuesday morning after a long weekend of frantic, closed-door negotiations involving the Evergreen Education Association and Washougal Education Association failed to produce an accord with the school districts to prevent a strike before the 5:00 p.m. Monday deadline. Teachers in both districts voted by more than 90 percent to authorize a strike last week if a deal was not reached before August 28, the beginning of the school year.

On Monday, Evergreen Public Schools announced in a press release that schools would be closed Tuesday, though it did not preclude the possibility of reaching a last-minute agreement as talks were set to continue into the evening.

Washougal Public Schools officials announced that they would be locking teachers out Tuesday after their latest offer, which they claim would give teachers a 26 percent increase in base pay, was rejected by Washougal Education Association negotiators, who disputed the amount offered to teachers. Teachers in the district voted by 96 percent for strike authorization on August 21.

Teachers in Evergreen and Washougal will join Longview teachers, who went on strike starting

Thursday after rejecting a 6.9 percent pay offer from the district.

Meanwhile, teachers in four other districts in southwest Washington may strike. Teachers in Ridgefield voted by 97.8 percent to authorize a strike on August 17, while teachers in Battle Ground, Hockinson, and the larger city of Vancouver, near Portland, also voted to strike last week if there is no contract by Wednesday. Camas teachers were set to vote at a Monday evening meeting on strike authorization.

Seattle teachers will vote Tuesday at a meeting called by the Seattle Education Association (SEA) on whether to authorize strike action over the union's demand for an inadequate 15 percent increase in salaries and long-overdue healthcare coverage for substitute teachers.

Of the 295 districts in the state, more than 200 do not yet have a teacher contract in place following the reopening of contract bargaining by the state Supreme Court's McCleary ruling, which found that the state was failing to fulfill its "paramount responsibility" to educate Washington children. As a result, the state was forced to provide an additional \$8.3 billion in additional education funding over the past two years, including some allocated specifically to increase teacher pay after Democratic Governor Jay Inslee's six-year freeze on the cost-of-living increases mandated by state law.

In response to the growing militancy of teachers statewide, the Washington Education Association (WEA) recommended its local affiliates request 15 percent pay increases for certified teachers and nearly 37 percent increases for support professionals. However, this represents far less than teachers lost as a result of the pay freeze and is inadequate to meet the state's high and growing cost of living.

The growing militancy of Washington teachers stands in sharp contrast to the efforts of the union apparatus to suppress teacher struggles and, where they emerge, to isolate and bring them to as speedy a resolution as possible. This was demonstrated by the action of the National Education Association, to which the WEA is affiliated, and the American Federation of Teachers during the teachers strikes earlier this year.

Teachers organized strikes and walkouts independently of the unions, which attempted to end the strikes after reaching deals that failed to address teacher demands for higher pay, more funding for education, and an end to the attacks on their pensions and health insurance, while urging teachers to “remember in November” to vote for Democrats.

During the 2015 Seattle teachers strike, the SEA called off the strike after just four days with a sellout contract offer to increase salaries by just 9.5 percent over three years in addition to the state-mandated cost-of-living increases, barely more than the 9.2 percent initial offer by Seattle Public Schools. The details of the contract were kept from the membership until after the strike was ended. The union, after dissipating the militant mood of teachers, gave members just three days to review the agreement before voting.

Teachers in Washington must draw the necessary conclusions and form their own fighting organizations to take their struggles forward independently of the union apparatus, which will only be more relentless in its efforts to suppress teacher militancy in Democrat-controlled Washington. Teachers must link up their struggles with other teachers, striking construction workers in Western Washington, and all sections of the working class against the trade unions and both capitalist parties.



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