Seattle teachers vote to authorize strike

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Teachers in Seattle, Washington voted Tuesday night to authorize a strike by the start of the school year on September 5 if a tentative agreement is not reached between the local school district and the teachers union. The strike authorization vote was held at a general membership meeting of the Seattle Education Association (SEA), which is negotiating a contract for over 5,000 teachers, support staff and other educators in the state's largest school district.

Thousands of teachers turned out to the downtown hall where the meeting was held. Though the meeting was closed to the media, teachers told the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* that educators were in a militant mood and repeatedly demanded a strike vote as union officials stalled. Teachers are particularly angry over stagnating wages, which cannot keep up with rising living costs. Seattle is 24 percent more expensive than the typical US city, and the cost of a two-bedroom apartment is nearly 80 percent higher than the national average.

The strike vote is the latest expression of opposition after the series of statewide revolts by educators in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina and other states earlier this year. Teachers in Los Angeles, the second largest school district in the United States, are currently voting on strike action.

As in these earlier struggles, teachers in Seattle and throughout the state of Washington are pitted against the entire political establishment—Democratic and Republican—along with the trade unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The unions, which have collaborated for decades in the bipartisan assault on public education, have sought to isolate each section of teachers and prevent their battles from coalescing into a nationwide fight.

The strike vote takes place as teachers in several smaller school districts in the state of Washington—including Battle Ground, Longview, Vancouver, Hockinson, Ridgefield, Evergreen and Washougal—have walked out, cancelling classes. Of the 295 districts in Washington state, more than 200 do not yet have a teacher contract in place.

"I am livid at the state and the school board too," Rob, a math teacher at Mercer Middle School in Seattle, told the WSWS. "I am ready to go shut down traffic. We need to make sure some action happens. I just bought a house in Seattle and pay higher taxes with a lower wage. That's the America we live in.

"We got student loans to pay. We got house mortgages, credit card debt. I want to have kids at some point. But I can't afford that life. It's an entire structural change that we need to make in order to afford the life our parents had. I can't comprehend how structurally messed up it is. I'm a socialist."

Hannah, who works in the district as a speech therapist, said she was fighting for "smaller class sizes, and more support." She said higher wages were needed "so we can live and work in the same city. There's a lot of teachers moving to south Seattle because they can't afford the rest of Seattle."

The fact that teachers are struggling with low incomes while Boeing and Amazon rake in record profits is "heartbreaking," she added. "For us as specialists, we don't get office space. We are often asked to work in the halls and have no space to do the work we are trained to do."

When asked what she thought about a statewide strike, Hannah said, "It's super important for everyone to be on board for it. Teachers are some of the hardest working people, but they are some of the most underpaid."

Vita, a Head Start teacher for young children, said, "I am here for our kids. They deserve all of us. But we're stressed out and can't even live in Seattle. It's insane." The companies and politicians "don't prioritize education," Vita said. "That just shows how little they care about children. They're being shot up in schools, and they don't care about the kids or the teachers. It's just about money for them. In my class I have homeless children. America is supposed to be this perfect land where children are cared for, and they're in shelters."

Even though she has college degrees and is employed,

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Vita said, “I always feel like we are one pay check away from homelessness. We have to fight, we have to have a struggle,” she concluded.

Funding for public schools in Washington, like states around the country, has stagnated or fallen since the financial crash of 2008. School funding in the state rose by only 2.7 percent between 2008 and 2015, and teachers have suffered a freeze on cost-of-living raises for years. Meanwhile, Democratic Governor Jay Inslee engineered the largest corporate tax cut in US history in 2016, handing over $8.7 billion to Washington-based airline manufacturer and defense contractor Boeing.

Teacher contracts are being renegotiated around the state because of a recent court ruling. In late 2017, the Washington Supreme Court found that the state had failed to fulfill its “paramount responsibility” to educate Washington children and ordered officials to provide an additional $8.3 billion in funding over two years, including some $2 billion specifically allocated to increase teacher pay.

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 37 percent increases for support professionals. This is far less than teachers lost as a result of the pay freeze and is inadequate to meet the state’s growing cost of living.

The local Seattle Education Association is currently bargaining for much less than the 15 percent increase, demanding between 8 and 10 percent. In 2015, the SEA sold out a five-day strike, accepting a 9.5 percent raise over three years, along with punitive teacher evaluation schemes. This was in line with the collusion of the NEA and AFT with the Obama administration’s corporate-backed “school reform” agenda and expansion of for-profit charter schools.

Poll after poll shows widespread public support for teachers and their fight to defend the right to quality education. The main obstacle to this struggle is the unions, which are feverishly working with the Democrats to prevent a statewide strike in Washington and to push through another reactionary deal that is entirely acceptable to the corporate and financial elite.

Aiding and abetting the unions are a host of pseudo-left organizations, including the International Socialist Organization and Socialist Alternative, which insist that teachers subordinate themselves to the authority of the unions. In a recent blog post, ISO member Jesse Hagopian—who is also a leading member of the Social Equity Educators (aka Social Equality Educators) caucus in the SEA—falsely presented the 2015 Seattle strike and statewide walkouts earlier this year as victories and promoted illusions in the Democratic-controlled state legislature.

Hagopian called for teachers to support regressive tax increases, which will hit working-class families the hardest, to fund a meager 15 percent pay increase. Speaking like a capitalist politician, Hagopian lectured teachers that demands for higher pay raises “are complicated in Seattle by the fact that the legislature lowered the amount of money Seattle Public Schools could raise from local levies from 37 percent to 24 percent of its budget in the coming years. That’s exactly why the SEA should only agree to a one-year contract. Take advantage of the $2 billion in new state funding now. Then, once the contract is signed, we build a campaign to pass the local school levy and immediately begin organizing to get all WEA locals to demand that the legislature lift the levy lid and finally fulfill their obligation to fully fund education.”

The “full funding” of education is not possible without a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth of the corporate and financial elite. The unions, which are aligned with the Democrats and defend the capitalist profit system, are thoroughly opposed to this. That is why teachers must elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community, independent of the unions, to mobilize parents, students and broader sections of the working class in a statewide strike of educators in Washington. These committees must strive to link up workers in Seattle and Washington with workers throughout the country and prepare a general strike to fight for the social rights of the entire working class.

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