

As union seeks to wrap up strikes, Washington teachers rally and call for statewide walkout

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Washington state teachers have issued the call for a statewide strike to deepen the struggle for improved funding for education. “ORGANIZERS NEEDED: are you fed up with how this entire McCleary decision has shaken out?” read a post on the Facebook group WA State Educators Unite. It added, “Are you ready to take ACTION to change the systems? Do you think a statewide solidarity one-day strike would be a bold statement? Please let me know! I am looking for people to join an organizing committee to start planning this strike.”

This met with interest and enthusiasm among teachers. Susan agreed, “I want to know—can we do a statewide walkout to support ALL districts?” Others expressed the hope that if enough districts strike that the WEA would call out the whole state. Lisa asked about plans for a statewide rally.

Aria, a Longview parent, told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), “I think a statewide strike would be fantastic, though it’s sad that it may have to come to this. The boards aren’t willing to pay teachers what they’re worth. If they aren’t worth much, then let’s see what the boards think about no teachers.”

The Washington Education Association (WEA), far from mobilizing such support to the ongoing struggle, is demanding that teachers return in many districts either without a settlement or without a vote on a tentative agreement.

In Seattle, Washington state’s largest district, the union announced Saturday that it had a tentative agreement but would unilaterally extend the old contract until a mass membership meeting and vote next Saturday. This blatant violation of the rudimentary tradition of “no contract, no work” failed to elicit a word of protest from International Socialist Organization member Jesse Hagopian, a leader of the Social Equity Educators faction of the Seattle Education Association (SEA). Far from seeking to advance socialist policies to deepen and extend teachers’ struggles, Hagopian has echoed SEA’s inadequate wage proposal of 15 percent and made no criticism of the WEA’s deliberate backstabbing statewide. He has, instead, focused on calls for additional regressive taxes to fund education that will hit the working class the hardest.

Where teachers are presently on strike—Longview, Hockinson, Washougal, Evergreen, Battle Ground, Vancouver

and Ridgefield—the unions are seeking to quickly wind down the walkouts. The WEA, no doubt under the instruction of National Education Association (NEA) president Lily Eskelsen García [compensation \$417,000 annually], is deliberately isolating the ongoing walkouts and betraying them.

The same attempts to block action were used throughout the “teacher spring,” as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the NEA worked to limit, shut down and isolate strikes and protests in West Virginia, Oklahoma, New Jersey, the Carolinas, Kentucky, Colorado and Arizona.

Last week it was announced that 98 percent of Los Angeles teachers have voted to strike in the nation’s second-largest district, yet there is no attempt to organize joint action of the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) teachers with those in Washington state. In fact, UTLA has affirmed they want “to prevent a strike.”

Seeking to impose a betrayal on districts one by one, the WEA is feverishly negotiating throughout the Labor Day weekend, including in Central Valley and Tacoma. Rainier teachers will rally on Labor Day and the union will announce a decision afterwards. Teachers are being told to go back to school without contracts in Orting and North Thurston. Strikes are still slated for Tukwila, Monroe, Arlington, and Puyallup.

The crisis of state funding in Washington is a direct product of the Democratic Party policies and the collusion of the unions. Under the eight years of the Obama administration, deep cuts were enacted to federal school funding. The Washington state legislature is controlled by Democrats, and there has been an unbroken string of Democratic governors since 1985. In other words, from the time of the filing of the *McCleary* lawsuit—citing the state for failing to adequately support public education in 2007—until today, the Democratic Party has presided over poorly funded classrooms, underpaid teachers and growing inequities among schools. One can be sure that Democratic Governor Jay Inslee and his colleagues—who handed the largest tax cut in US history to Boeing in 2013—are working behind the scenes with the WEA this weekend to quash the walkouts.

Support across the state, by contrast, has steadily grown. Over

2,000 teachers and community supporters rallied at the Evergreen School District headquarters Friday. Another 1,700 joined a picket at the Vancouver district. Students turned up at the local Friday night football game all dressed in red to support teachers. “The teachers are out there every single day,” Winston Handwerker, an Evergreen High School student, told KPTV. “They are here for us, but they’re not given what they deserve...they do everything for us and they just don’t have enough.”

The young teacher who posted the call for a statewide strike spoke to the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* about the inadequacy of the legislative settlement under the *McCleary* court ruling. “This is a legislative deal to skirt the issue of fully funding education in the state of Washington. The legislature passed on money and basically said, ‘You guys fight it out.’ They are pitting worker against worker. These district-by-district deals perpetuate inequity across the board. There was inequity before, but this is now amplifying it. In my district they have now agreed to a 31-step pay scale, while others have 16. In other words, teachers can rise to the top of the pay scale in half the time. Consider what the lifelong earnings differential would be!”

In many districts, teachers have been threatened not only with pushing out the years of service schedule and other hidden cuts, but by the prospect of subsequent years of budget cuts. Another teacher emphasized, “I saw this coming way back when [Democratic Governor] Inslee signed off... can we say statewide pay inequity only got worse?!?!?”

The first teacher said she spoke to the union about mobilizing teachers and parents. “I asked to do teacher rallies at my district, to organize events like meet-and-greet with the public so that we could tell them the situation from our perspective. I was told by the union ‘No, don’t organize anything.’ I was really uncomfortable with that, but I wasn’t ready to go against their opinion. Now I regret it.

“At the school board meeting, only preselected union people could speak. I believe we didn’t get a good contract because we didn’t have direct member input. There has to be more room for educator voices in negotiation and bargaining. The union said they ‘had the relationships’ and ‘that’s how it works’ but we get a crappy deal.

“I am livid about the negotiations. It was unacceptable in our local. We had three hours to receive the contract, digest it and vote. We were told by the union that we couldn’t see it beforehand because that could fuel the Freedom Foundation. But it was the membership kept in the dark.

“Where is the WEA in all of this? Where is the call for a statewide strike? Where is the leadership? I think we need rank-and-file committees to organize from the bottom.”

She concluded, “This is the only way to fight. We cannot rely on the legislature. If the union is not doing what we want, we have to change that too. I am trying to get a committee to organize a statewide strike. I’m fed up with the unions now,

which is sad because I love unions. But teachers have to unite statewide and, if there is no official sanction, so be it.”

In this vein, speaking to other educators on WA Educators Unite, she posted, “...what will the next revolution [be] in how workers unite to fight for what they deserve? We can think past the union and imagine a new way to run our workplaces... Not enough union dues go to providing workers with the ability to take on direct action with their employer anymore. Instead, they are a way for the electoral system to take money from workers to run elections (local/state/national) that result in very little for the actual workers.”

“We are talking about the control of capitalism,” she insisted to the WSWS. “How can it be that it takes four jobs to make a living? The powers-that-be want us docile in the face of injustice. I have never organized a labor struggle, but yes, they are all class struggles. The unions are funneling money to politics, might as well say it, to the Democrats. Those in our union who opted out of the lobbying part of dues were not allowed to vote on the contract! Meanwhile all the Democrats are just neoliberals, giving tax cuts to Boeing and Amazon without batting an eye. What about funding education?”

Washington teachers’ strikes are at a crossroads. The demands for statewide strike action, rallies and rank-and-file committees point the way forward. Washington teachers should elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community to fight for a statewide strike and to broaden their fight. Teachers should link their struggle with those in Los Angeles and across the country and with the many sections of workers engaged in the same fight, including UPS workers, Amazon workers, steelworkers and autoworkers.

This is a political struggle. It requires opposition to both the pro-capitalist unions and the big-business politicians of the Democrats and Republicans. The egalitarian principles of public education are completely incompatible with the terrible growth of social inequality for which capitalism is responsible. Only a socialist program can address the crying need for billions more to provide free, high quality education for all and ensure the social right of all to good jobs, healthcare and a life free of poverty. The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers to contact us and take up this fight.



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