

Seattle Education Association orders teachers to work without contract vote

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The Seattle Education Association (SEA), the local affiliate of the Washington Education Association (WEA), is sending teachers to work on the first day of school Wednesday after reaching a tentative agreement Friday with Seattle Public Schools (SPS), which meets none of the teachers' demands. The union has ordered educators back to the classrooms without releasing the full details of the deal and teachers will not have a chance to vote on it until the weekend.

The union contract covers more than 5,000 educators in Seattle, which is one of 200 districts in Washington state negotiating new contracts in the wake of a state Supreme Court decision that declared that the state had failed its "paramount responsibility" to educate children and had to increase funding for schools and teacher salaries. The settlement by the SEA is aimed at isolating striking teachers in other districts and to preempt the increasing calls by rank-and-file teachers for a statewide strike to win substantial improvements to wages and school funding.

Last Tuesday, Seattle educators packed Benaroya Hall, the city's immense downtown opera hall, for a general membership meeting where they overwhelmingly authorized a strike by voice vote. Teachers, specialists and support staff expressed their eagerness to wage a fight for salary hikes necessary to meet the rising cost of living in Seattle, health care for substitute teachers, and an expansion of public-school staff and greater funding more broadly. Attendees reported that many educators called for a vote repeatedly at the beginning, interrupting the union officials as they sought to drag out their explanation of the lack of progress on the basic demands of educators.

The union said it would call teachers out if a tentative agreement was not reached by Wednesday, September 5. Late Friday night, the school board and union

announced that they had reached a deal.

Although they are being sent back to work before approving the contract, educators have little to no information regarding the agreement, and will only receive details on Tuesday evening at the earliest, once union representatives meet. The contract ratification vote will take place on Saturday, September 8. Tellingly, the school board has released more details about the agreement than SEA itself, which is seeking to prevent teachers from reviewing the actual agreement in advance of returning to work on Wednesday.

In their Friday night press release, Seattle Public Schools began, "We are excited to share that the Seattle Education Association and district have reached a tentative contract agreement," going on to list the normal school start dates for the district. The highlights of this agreement, they say, include "competitive pay increases, increased nurses, increased counselors for middle and high schools, enhanced substitute health care benefits, and an expansion of 'Race and Equity Teams' along with other professional development."

That the school board resorts to such amorphous descriptions only underscores the fact that the union has reached a deal that in no way addresses teachers' needs. From the beginning, the SEA limited its demands to meager wage increases and advanced no proposal to oppose the ongoing assault on public education by the Democratic Party, which runs Seattle and the state government, and the giant corporate interests that have systematically looted the funding for essential services.

In 2013, Democratic Governor Jay Inslee backed the largest state corporate tax break in US history, an \$8.7 billion giveaway to aircraft giant and defense contractor Boeing. The Democratic city government has also

repeatedly handed over tax cuts and other incentives to Seattle-based Amazon, whose billionaire CEO, Jeff Bezos, pockets the equivalent of a teacher's starting annual salary every 12 seconds.

The SEA leadership majority has limited pay raise demands to 8 to 10 percent, while the so-called radical Social Equity Educators faction, backed by Socialist Alternative, International Socialist Organization and Democratic Socialists of America, has called for a 15 percent pay hike.

Teachers know very well that these salary demands are grossly inadequate to make up for years of stagnant wages while the cost of living has soared in the Seattle area. Seattle has seen the highest growth in housing costs of any city in the United States. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, anyone making less than \$50,400 last year is considered "low income."

By comparison, the starting salary for certificated teachers in Seattle last year was about \$37,000. Meanwhile, teachers, many of whom are saddled with student loan debt, have seen their salaries stagnate over the past decade, including a six-year period where they did not even receive their state-mandated cost of living increases.

In contrast to rank-and-file teachers' call for a statewide strike to address the funding crisis in the state, ISO member Jesse Hagopian, a leader of the Social Equity faction, has provided a cover for the SEA and the Democrats and is advocating a new statewide levy, which would fund meager pay raises with regressive taxes that hit the working class the hardest.

The deal will also do little to improve the conditions faced by substitute teachers, the most precarious layer of teachers in the district. While it ostensibly provides for "enhanced" healthcare benefits for these teachers, there is no indication of what this actually means. Rather, it is likely that this "enhancement" entails nothing more than a modest benefit for those substitute teachers fortunate enough to work nearly as many hours as a full-time teacher.

Rank-and-file educators must reject the blackmail by the SEA and elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community to wage a genuine struggle. They should demand the release of the contract details and a ratification vote before any return to work, based on the principle of "no contract, no work."

Seattle teachers should reach out to other educators to wage a statewide walkout and fight to unite with teachers around the country who are engaged in struggle, including Los Angeles teachers who voted last week by 98 percent for strike action. At the same time, teachers must appeal to other sections of the working class, including UPS, Amazon, Boeing workers, along with students and parents.

Rank-and-file committees should issue their own demands, including salary increases of at least 30%, expanded staff and programs, reduced class sizes, a sharp increase in funding for public schools, immediate provision of healthcare for substitute teachers.

It is a lie to claim that there is no money when both big business parties squander trillions on bank bailouts, corporate tax cuts and criminal wars. The provision of the necessary resources to secure high quality public education for all requires a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the giant corporations, the establishment of a progressive taxation system to implement a radical redistribution of wealth, and the nationalization of the giant corporations like Boeing and Amazon under workers' control. This requires the building of a powerful political movement of the working class against both corporate controlled parties and the fight for socialism.



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