

Tacoma teachers vote to strike Thursday

Walkouts by Washington state educators spread

Jerry White
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Teachers in at least four additional school districts walked out Tuesday, as strikes and protests by educators spread across the state of Washington. Teachers are demanding substantial improvements in pay and school funding. The escalation of the struggle is taking place in defiance of the efforts by the National Education Association (NEA) and its state and local affiliates to isolate walkouts and prevent a statewide strike.

Picket lines of educators went up Tuesday morning in Stanwood-Camano, 50 miles north of Seattle, and Rainier, Tumwater and Centralia, all located south of the state capital of Olympia. The strikes led to the cancellation of classes for thousands of students scheduled for the first day of school on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Teachers in several other districts—Evergreen, Battle Ground, Washougal and Longview in Southwestern Washington—remain on strike. Teachers in Puyallup, Tukwila, Conway, South Whidbey, Monroe and Wapato have all voted to strike if agreements are not reached by the start of school this week.

On Tuesday night, more than 2,000 teachers attended a mass meeting in Tacoma, the state's second largest school district, and voted 97.3 percent in favor of authorizing a strike if a new contract is not reached by Thursday, the first day of school. Teachers are outraged by the school district's insulting offer of a 3.1 percent raise, which is barely above the state-mandated 2.5 percent pay hike. Any additional raise, the district has threatened, would be paid for through 115 layoffs.

As in other districts, particularly in metropolitan areas, teachers in Tacoma are saddled with crushing student loan debts and cannot pay for rising housing, medical and other living expenses on their meager salaries. Educators are all the more outraged because Tacoma Schools Superintendent Carla Santorno makes more than \$291,000

a year.

A school psychologist told the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter*, "I'm at the strike meeting right now and, as an avid socialist, I'm pissed that our local unions aren't coming together to fight inequality in our state. Our politicians have abandoned public education in the name of 'job creation,' aka corporate welfare."

The Washington Education Association (WEA) and its local affiliates have rushed to reach deals in major cities and prevent a unified struggle. Over the weekend, the unions shut down a strike by 1,600 teachers in Vancouver, in the southwest near the Oregon border, and reached deals in Camas, Ridgefield, Arlington and Hockinson.

Last Friday, the Seattle Education Association announced it had reached a deal and instructed 5,000 teachers to report to work Wednesday before they had the full details of the agreement or any chance to vote on it. The SEA has scheduled a membership meeting for Saturday to vote on the deal.

After getting a cursory text message about the deal, one Seattle teacher posted on the SEA Facebook page, "We need the details, please!! The Seattle educators have been left in the dark during this whole process. PLEASE give the Seattle staff some information ASAP—we deserve to know what is going on, especially with regards to salary!"

During negotiations, the SEA leadership called for a one-year pay increase of 8 to 10 percent, while the so-called Social Equity Educators faction called for a 15 percent hike. Both proposals are woefully inadequate for teachers who have faced a years-long pay freeze in a city where the cost of a two-bedroom apartment is 80 percent higher than the national average.

The immediate impulse for the wave of teacher strikes was the recent state supreme court ruling, which found that the state of Washington, long controlled by the

Democratic Party, had failed to fulfill its constitutionally mandated responsibility to educate children and had to increase funding for schools and teacher salaries.

However, the state has left it up to the 300 districts to vie over the estimated \$2 billion allocated for salaries out of the \$9.2 billion in state funding over the next six years. In addition, a new cap on local tax levies, which could reduce school revenue, means that whatever districts give to teachers this year they could take away next year.

In an effort to justify their sellout deals, the unions are pointing to a possible state takeover of health care for school employees. However, as West Virginia teachers have learned through bitter experience, such schemes, jointly run by the state, insurance companies and the unions, impose impossibly high co-pays and premiums to make up for revenue shortfalls, and these higher costs eat up whatever pay raises teachers receive.

The assault on education and teachers has proceeded as Governor Jay Inslee and other state Democrats showered billions of dollars in tax cuts on Washington-based companies like Boeing and Amazon. The unions, which are politically aligned with the Democrats, have opposed any statewide action by teachers. Far from proposing any challenge to the economic domination of the giant corporations and the state's billionaires, like Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the unions are planning to work with the Democrats once again to fund the schools and meager pay increases through more regressive taxes that hit the working class the hardest.

The struggle in Washington takes place as teachers and school employees across the country fight to recoup lost wages and increase resources to public schools that have suffered deep cuts in funding and personnel since the 2008 financial crash a decade ago.

One in five teachers must work a second job to make ends meet, and economic insecurity has led thousands to leave the profession, leading cash-strapped districts to hire teachers with insufficient training. According to the Learning Policy Institute, schools are starting this year with 100,000 classrooms in which teachers are either not adequately certified or lack experience.

Last Friday, teachers in Los Angeles, the second largest school district in the nation, voted by 98 percent to authorize strike action. Officials from the United Teachers Los Angeles, however, have made it clear they are opposed to a strike by the city's 33,000 teachers, who have been working without a new contract for 13 months.

Far from organizing a struggle, the unions have proven to be the biggest obstacle to a unified struggle by teachers

for livable wages and the right to high quality public education for their students. Allied with the Democratic Party, the unions have colluded with both big business parties to make teachers and the whole working class pay for the bailout of the Wall Street banks and the squandering of trillions more on tax cuts and endless wars.

The top executives of the teachers unions make 10 times or more than the average salaries of starting teachers and have no interest in opposing social inequality. In 2017, NEA President Lily Eskelsen García (\$348,732) and Executive Director John Stocks (\$375,942) easily cleared the threshold for the richest one percent of the population, as did AFT President Randi Weingarten (\$492,563), Secretary-Treasurer Lorretta Johnson (\$392,530), and Executive Vice President Mary Cathryn Ricker (\$337,434). These reported figures do not include additional fees and income derived from handling billions of dollars in pension funds and other investments.

The strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states, earlier this year, took the form of a rebellion against the unions. The unions, however, reasserted their control over these struggles, isolated and betrayed them.

If such an outcome is not to be repeated, Washington teachers must take the conduct of this battle into their own hands by electing rank-and-file strike committees in every school and community. These committees should mobilize educators, parents and teachers to reject the sellout deals being pushed by the unions and to organize a statewide strike for good wages and fully funded services.

At the same time, rank-and-file teachers should reach out to educators and other workers in struggle throughout the country, including UPS, Amazon, steel and auto workers, to prepare a general strike. The securing of good paying jobs and the resources for a vast improvement of public education is only possible through a political struggle by the working class, in opposition to both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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