

Striking Tacoma, Washington, teachers demand better pay, funding for education

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Teachers and support staff in Tacoma, Washington, began their strike Thursday, after Tacoma Public Schools and the local affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA) failed to reach an agreement. The 2,400 educators under the Tacoma Education Association joined roughly 5,000 other educators in ten districts striking across Washington state.

The TEA was forced to call the strike following a 97.3 percent strike authorization vote Tuesday night and an insulting 3.1 percent pay increase offered by the district. Teachers throughout the state have had their pay frozen for years. A state Supreme Court decision forced the state legislature to provide \$2 billion to districts statewide for teacher salary increases, sparking negotiations between school boards and local education unions.

The unions are working to isolate teachers in each district from each other and prevent a state-wide walkout. However, sentiment for statewide action and a broader struggle is growing. On Saturday, teachers in Seattle, the largest school district in the state, will vote on a deal supported by the union that includes a 10 percent wage increase, which is far below what teachers have lost from the pay freeze.

At demonstrations in Tacoma on the first day of the strike, teachers from every grade level and subject were joined by parents and students on picket lines across the city. The energetic rallies attracted honks and cheers of solidarity from members of the largely working class community.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* visited the picket lines to speak with educators, workers and students about the social and political issues involved in their struggle.

Benny, an art teacher in Tacoma, spoke with reporters

at a picket line outside the Tacoma Public Schools central administrative office amid hundreds of attendees. He explained the conditions facing educators: “During the 2008 recession, teachers felt they had to give up a lot with the financial crisis. But now, the only ones who have caught up since that recession are on the school and business boards. We haven’t caught up. Food and housing costs are going up, but our salaries are staying the same.

“Back in the 1980s, Washington teachers were actually the fourth best-paid educators in the country. I was working in the military at that time, but I left that career and became a teacher in Washington thinking it would offer better economic stability. Now we’re all having a hard time. We want to fight to get back to the position of being well-paid, financially secure and with funding for schools.”

Considering the way forward for Tacoma teachers, Benny suggested that new school board members might be more progressive. WSWs reporters argued that even the so-called “progressive” Democrats on the Seattle school board have enforced drastic cuts to education and refuse to provide teachers with adequate salary increases. He agreed and said, “That’s true. It’s about fighting against the 1 percent.”

The WSWs also spoke with teachers, students and parents at Lincoln High School, who were conducting a spirited picket beside a busy residential street in the southern region of Tacoma.

Bryan, a sophomore student who likes mathematics, explained why he came out to the picket lines. “On Facebook, I saw that Tacoma teachers are paid less than the surrounding districts, about ten percent less. I don’t think that’s fair. Students are trying to help, a lot of parents and students support the teachers and what they are fighting for.”

He said he wanted to learn more about socialism and the need to build a unified struggle of teachers, students and the working class. “We should always have high quality education.”

The WSWS spoke to Jared and Charmaine, both teachers in the Tacoma school system. Charmaine said, “There are increasing expectations and increasing responsibilities which are weighing teachers down. We are not given the tools to do our job. We are equipped to do our job. We are paid seven and a half hours, but we regularly work ten.”

Jared added, “If a teacher says they are working 50 hours a week, then they aren’t doing their job.”

Jared referenced the “school choice” and privatization schemes advocated by the Democratic and Republican parties, along with Trump’s Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. “Education is becoming about business instead of children, who are becoming dollar signs.”

Michelle, an elementary school teacher in Tacoma, talked to reporters at the rally outside of Tacoma Public Schools central administrative office. She explained why teachers were actively seeking to strike for their demands. “It’s been very difficult keeping up with the costs of living here when we aren’t getting more pay. The state is finally giving the districts some money specifically for salaries, and we are demanding what we deserve to be paid.

“The public really needs to question the local and state level officials about their intentions,” Michelle continued. “The superintendent of Tacoma Public Schools just got a \$10,000 raise over the summer, bringing her salary above \$300k. Yet they won’t give us more than a 3.1 percent raise when we are really struggling?”

The average two-bedroom apartment in Tacoma is \$1,500 a month, a shocking effect of the soaring rent prices along the West Coast. Along with rising healthcare and food costs, teachers’ real wages have been cut to the point of financial insecurity.

Reflecting on the conditions facing educators and schools, Michelle expanded, “It’s not just about teachers, there’s also school support staff, office staff, education assistants, substitute teachers. It’s about all workers. We have been getting so much support from our families and students, too. Everyone has a stake in education. It’s not just about our personal well-being.”

“It’s really just sad that the United States, the richest country in the world, does not provide healthcare and education to all people. Nobody,” she demanded, “no matter how much they make, should be deprived of those rights. I believe in socialized medicine and in free, high-quality education for everyone. There is no reason why we can’t do such a thing with the millions and billions that exist at the top.”



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