

Teachers strike in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania

Our reporter
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Roughly 600 public school teachers in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania walked off the job Monday in a strike over rising health care costs and wages. Teachers set up lines around some of the district's ten schools, which are closed indefinitely.

According to a spokesman for the school district, teachers on Monday were offered a cumulative five-year salary increase of 11.53 percent, as a “last, final, and best” offer. Even if the figure is accurate, it would be more than gobbled up by rising health care costs and inflation. In other words, the district's proposal is to lock teachers into a long-term wage cut.

The school board is also demanding drastic increases in health care premiums for employee spouses. This could force many teachers and professional staff to forgo health care coverage for husbands and wives.

Teachers have been without a contract for two years, during which time their wages have been frozen. Meanwhile, previously scheduled salary “step” increases have not been distributed since the 2014-2015 school year, when they were shelved as a means of avoiding threatened furloughs during a financial crisis that year. Currently, East Stroudsburg teachers earn the lowest wages in the two-county region of the Delaware Water gap, roughly an hour west of metropolitan New York City.

The school board's position is a provocation against teachers, whose sacrifices have helped the East Stroudsburg school district build up \$60 million in reserves—the third most of any district in Pennsylvania. Several school administrators take home salaries of more than \$100,000.

Borrowing from a playbook used across the country, the district school board has lashed out at teachers, accusing them of attempting to “hurt the students and their families.”

This has not produced the desired effect. Teachers have won broad support from local students, parents and workers, many of whom have joined them at picket lines.

Alana Morales, a senior in the school's South high school, told local reporters, “I support the teachers completely because they have their own families and it's terrible that they have to go through all this because the school doesn't want to get them money.”

Freshman Jenny Ro agreed. “I also agree with the teachers,” she said. “I'm proud of them for standing up for themselves and I want them to do this.”

Teachers “are with our children every day, and my kids are flourishing because of them,” said Cynthia Valcukas, a parent of two children in the district. “I want to return the favor.”

The union nominally representing teachers, a local affiliate of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), is also following a pattern used by union officials everywhere. It is isolating striking teachers, treating the matter as a solely “local” issue of an uncooperative school board while making appeals to the Democratic Party politicians, a few of whom have made appearances on the picket lines.

In fact, PSEA negotiators have made clear that they are not negotiating wage and insurance improvements, but concessions. They have pleaded with the district to return to the negotiating table.

“The district has put out positions, which are basically their demands, that were unrealistic from the very beginning,” union representative Mark McDade told the *Pocono Record*. “Really, they're just moving from an extreme position to a less extreme one, whereas the teachers have offered up increases in health care contributions and proposed changes on the salary schedule to make it more affordable and sustainable

moving forward.”

The PSEA has made no attempt to link the fight of East Stroudsburg’s teachers with those elsewhere in the US—where major struggles are underway in Washington state and Los Angeles, on the heels of mass strikes this year in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona.

Instead the PSEA has reached out to the Democratic Party, inviting Susan Wild, a candidate for Pennsylvania’s 7th Congressional District, to posture as a friend of public education. Wild walked the picket lines with teachers briefly on Tuesday.

“I stand with the teachers of East Stroudsburg because every working family deserves access to good wages and affordable health care,” she said in a statement. “We must ensure that their wages reflect the value they provide to our children, to help ensure opportunity, mobility and success for the next generation of the 7th district.”

Wild must think East Stroudsburg teachers have just arrived from another planet. In fact, all across the country, Democratic school boards, mayors, legislatures and governors work in league with their Republican counterparts in the attack on teachers’ wages and conditions.

Pennsylvania’s governor, Tom Wolf, a Democrat, has overseen years of austerity for public education. Many district budgets in the state have not recovered, in real terms, to their pre-2008 funding levels. A recent survey of state school districts, conducted by the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials and the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, found that 48 percent of the state’s school districts anticipate increasing financial distress in the coming year, and that between 55 percent will reduce or alter instructional staff to cope. Another 11 percent intend to furlough professional staff, and 58 percent will slash extra-curricular activities.

By way of comparison, the combined wealth of the ten billionaires residing in Pennsylvania, at \$25 billion, according to *Forbes*, is more than four times greater than Wolf’s budget allocation for all the schools, students and teachers in the state.

At the national level, before the election of Trump, Barack Obama took the wrecking ball to public education with his “Race to the Top” initiative, which pitted states and school districts in competition for miserly funding doled out based on the rollback of

work rules for teachers and the promotion of standardized testing. Meanwhile, Obama found endless billions to bail out the big banks that caused the 2008-2009 financial crisis.

Clearly, this is not simply a local issue. To conduct their fight, teachers in East Stroudsburg need to take matters out of the hands of the NEA by electing rank-and-file strike committees to link up with teachers facing the exact same conditions across the country. Such a struggle, which will necessarily come into conflict with both parties of big business, will win wide support in the working class.



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