

# Washington state strikes continue as Tumwater teachers defy back-to-work order

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Teachers in the small town of Tumwater, Washington voted overwhelmingly Wednesday to continue striking in defiance of a back-to-work order issued earlier in the day by Thurston County Superior Court Judge Chris Lanese. According to teachers, the walkout, which began September 1, will continue despite threats to impose sanctions on them.

Tumwater union officials reported that after “intense debate” during a two-and-a-half hour mass meeting members voted “emphatically” to defy the order.

This courageous action by the 400 teachers, just south of the state capital of Olympia, came after the judge hypocritically sided with the school district’s claims that the continuation of the strike would do “substantial harm to students.” In fact, teachers in Tumwater and across the state are fighting not just for themselves but for their students who are suffering from the effects of decades of budget cuts and chronic underfunding. Conditions have gotten so bad that the state supreme court ruled that the state politicians in Olympia violated their constitutional duty to provide quality education to the state’s 1.1 million students.

“Sometimes what we need to do is stand up for something we don’t believe is right and, in this case, we don’t believe that’s right,” teacher Doug Peltier told KOMO News. “So that’s why we’re out here.”

“I am a paraeducator, not a teacher,” a Tumwater paraeducator who requested anonymity told the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter*. “But, I am out in support of teachers because that is my job, supporting teachers and students.”

Tumwater district officials threatened to seek massive fines against the teachers if they did not surrender. “If the teachers do not report to work, the district will be forced to take the necessary steps the judge outlined in court to seek relief,” the district said in a news release.

Judge Lanese previously declared the strike illegal under a Washington state law prohibiting public employees from striking. A similar ruling has also been made by another court against 2,400 teachers striking in Tacoma, near Seattle. Tacoma and Battle Ground school boards have also requested that the state impose a mediator under the rarely used Public Employment Relations Commission.

In Battle Ground, in southern Washington, just 25 miles northeast of Portland, Oregon, teachers have been on strike since August 29, after voting 98.4 percent to approve a walkout. On Wednesday night, the school board voted 4-0 to mandate the district to initiate legal action against the teachers. The district attempted to intimidate teachers by threatening to sue them individually if they refuse to return to work. Earlier this week, the school board voted, also unanimously, to withhold teachers’ pay if they don’t return to work by Monday.

Battle Ground teachers responded with a rally outside the courthouse, chanting their defiance of the ruling, calling out “it’s not over.”

Hundreds of Tacoma teachers rallied Wednesday at school district headquarters to show their opposition to the latest offer of a 12.45 percent raise, up from the original 3.1 percent proposal. Teachers condemned the offer, chanting, “Tacoma Public Schools hear our call, your best offer is way too small.” On Thursday, Tacoma school district announced it is considering court action to obtain an injunction declaring the strike illegal.

District officials also hoped to bribe some educators to cross the picket lines, sending out a voice mail to teachers stating, “All 10-month staff members who choose to report to work Thursday and future work days before school officially starts will receive extra

pay for extra work.”

Since late August the state has been swept by a series of strikes, involving 14 districts, with teachers in nearly 20 districts approving strike authorization by large margins, including in Seattle, the largest school district in the state. Far from mobilizing teachers and other sections of the working class to support these struggles, the Washington Education Association (WEA) and its parent union, the National Education Association (NEA), have spent the last two weeks trying to shut down one strike after another to prevent the resistance of teachers from coalescing into a statewide walkout like the ones that spread across West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states earlier this year.

This was most sharply demonstrated in Seattle, the state’s largest school district, where the Seattle Education Association blocked 5,000 teachers in the city from joining other striking educators by agreeing to a last-minute deal and then instructing teachers and support staff to report for the first day of classes on September 5 even before they had a chance to thoroughly study the tentative agreement and vote on it.

The deal, which was pushed through last Saturday, raises wages by a meagre 10.5 percent over one year after teachers have gone through years of stagnant wages in one of the most expensive housing markets within the US. The sellout deal also continues to deprive substitute teachers of health care coverage, while paraeducators and office staff will still be paid poverty level wages.

Many Seattle teachers, having taken the measure of the union, responded by abstaining from the vote, forcing the SEA to text paraeducators to drum up enough attendance to meet the required quorum. The low turnout was in sharp contrast to the thousands who had shown up just 12 days earlier to overwhelmingly vote for strike action.

A particularly destructive role was played in Seattle by the Social Equity Educators faction in the SEA, which is led by members of the International Socialist Organization and other fake “left” groups. While issuing mild criticisms of the deal, the SEE praised it as a major accomplishment and insisted that teachers had to bow to the authority of the union even as it was sabotaging the struggle of Washington teachers.

The sellout of the Seattle teachers paved the way for school authorities, the courts and the state government

to ratchet up its threats against teachers in Tacoma, Battle Ground and Tumwater who remain on strike. The authorities feel emboldened by the treachery of the unions, which has left these embattled teachers vulnerable to state attack.

Poll after poll has shown that there is popular support for the teachers and their demands for improved wages and school funding. This support must be mobilized to defend striking teachers from the possibility of fines, mass arrests and attempts to strip them of their teaching licenses. Such a struggle will not be carried out by the unions but must be taken up by teachers themselves through the election of rank-and-file committees in every school, workplace and community. These committees should link up teachers across Washington, the United States and internationally, while reaching out to broader sections of the working class—UPS, Amazon, steel and auto workers—to prepare a general strike to oppose state repression and to defend the right to secure and good-paying jobs, high quality public education, health care, housing and other social rights.

The struggle in the state of Washington shows that teachers are not only in a battle against Trump, Betsy DeVos and the national and state Republicans but the Democratic Party as well. The entire state government, from Governor Jay Inslee to the majority in both houses of the state legislature, is controlled by the Democrats. While insisting there is no money to significantly improve teacher salaries and school funding, Inslee and the state legislators have approved billions in tax cuts for Boeing, Amazon and other corporate giants.

Teachers across the country are being thrust into struggle again, with educators in Los Angeles voting by 98 percent for strike action, and hundreds of teachers in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania striking for improved wages, benefits and school conditions. This growing struggle must be combined with a new political strategy based on opposition to both corporate-controlled parties and the fight for a socialist program to allocate the necessary resources to vastly improve public education and the living standards of those who provide it.



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