

Unions shut down Washington teacher strikes

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After weeks of strikes by educators, the teachers' walkouts in the US state of Washington were shut down Monday. By Tuesday morning, all of Washington's 1.1 million students and thousands of teachers and school staff will be back in the classrooms, with none of the basic issues resolved.

Washington teachers carried out their struggle in the wake of the public education strike wave of last spring, when rank-and-file teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona rebelled against the unions and carried out statewide strikes over low pay, poor health care, and school funding. They also joined the present back-to-school battles breaking out from Pennsylvania to California.

Like their counterparts across the US, Washington teachers face larger class sizes, dwindling funding for programs, poor infrastructure, and stagnant salaries and wages. They have had their pay frozen for years, even as costs of living in the region skyrocket.

As in the struggles earlier this year, the central obstacle in developing a united movement of teachers has been the unions, which worked to isolate every separate struggle. The development of a state-wide strike and a broader struggle of all teachers raised and continues to raise the need for educators to take the fight into their own hands through the formation of independent, rank-and-file committees.

Though Washington state typically staggers school district employee contracts to avoid simultaneous negotiations, the state legislature was forced to give out \$7.3 billion in new education funding to all 295 school districts, with around \$1 billion specified for teacher salary increases. This one-time infusion into district budgets came out of the 2012 State Supreme Court *McCleary* ruling, which argued in favor of parents who sued the state for failing to adequately fund K-12 public education, thereby violating the state's constitution.

These particular legal and political conditions meant that teachers in every district were engaged in contract negotiations at the same time. The objective groundwork was present for teachers to link up all their struggles in a common fight to defend public education. Indeed, there was popular support among rank-and-file educators for a statewide fight, which could rally behind it broad sections of the working class, including families and students.

The school district boards and local affiliates of the National Education Association union worked to isolate teachers and

push through sellout deals. The last thing the unions wanted was for teachers to launch a statewide strike, which would pit them in direct conflict with the state government that is dominated by the Democratic Party.

By the last week of August, forty contracts were finalized with two hundred under negotiation. Nearly 20 districts saw overwhelming strike authorization votes by educators and strikes broke out in eleven districts. In the districts where union negotiating teams could not reach an agreement with the district prior to a strike authorization vote, the union's primary objective was to avoid strike action by keeping educators in the dark about the negotiations and rushing through deals as quickly as possible.

In Seattle, the largest city in Washington, close to 5,000 teachers and support staff voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike if a deal was not reached before the start of school on September 5. The Seattle Education Association reached an agreement some days later on, August 31, but shared no details about the agreement until the evening before teachers were sent back to school without voting on the contract.

Less than a third of the membership showed up that Saturday to vote on the deal, which offered an insulting 10.5 percent wage increase to educators who have seen soaring costs for rent and health care alongside deteriorating conditions in their schools. This increase failed to make up for the decline in real wages due to the years-long pay freeze.

The sellout of the Seattle teachers paved the way for school authorities, the courts and the state government to ratchet up threats against teachers in Tacoma, Battle Ground and Tumwater, who were the last to remain on strike. The courts and school districts claimed that the continuation of the strikes would do "substantial harm to students." Emboldened by the treachery of the unions, authorities pursued legal action to force the teachers back to work.

However, teachers were prepared to defy the court orders. Tacoma teachers protested against the 3.1 percent raise offer outside the central office the day before school board threatened legal action. On September 12, Tumwater teachers voted overwhelmingly to defy a back-to-work order issued by a Thurston County judge the day before. Two days later, Battle Ground educators voted by 89 percent to keep striking after they received their legal notice.

The votes of defiance against state orders expressed the pent-

up opposition of teachers, who in the course of their struggle have directly confronted the entire political establishment.

Rather than defend rank-and-file teachers by mobilizing support among teachers and workers statewide, the unions rushed through deals. Educators in these districts had less than 24 hours to review the tentative agreements before voting on them.

None of the contracts, even in the handful of areas that got pay raises of 20 to 30 percent, address the fundamental crisis in public education. School districts have commented on their rising budget deficits, which they claim will only get worse with this year's pay increases, threatening future cuts. Seattle Public Schools expects a \$44 million annual budget shortfall by 2019 and \$68 million by 2021.

As they wrap up the strikes and negotiations, the unions and districts hope to redirect educators' frustrations to the midterm elections in November and the following state legislative session in 2019. Teachers must, the officials say, rely on the largely Democratic-run legislature to "fix the inequities" in the funding of state education through more "flexibility" in local income and property taxes.

Promotion of the Democratic Party is at the heart of the American Federation of Teachers' and National Education Association's strategy, the latter of which has taken up the teachers' hashtag #RedForEd as the title for its initiative in "standing up to lawmakers to ask for better pay and school funding." AFT President Randi Weingarten summed up the strategy, "The most important piece right now is to try to build on the strikes and create transformative change in state after state by changing who's in the elected leadership because most education policies happen in state legislatures, executive chambers and local school boards."

The unions want teachers to forget the fact that Democrats, no less than Republicans, are hostile to their interests and to public education. The Obama administration's "Race to the Top" program continued on the Bush administration's attack on public education through the promotion of charter schools and the victimization of teachers. This attack is now being escalated by Trump and his education secretary, Betsy DeVos.

In Washington, right-wing and so-called "progressive" Democrats have based their calls for public education and social program funding on regressive tax levy schemes that hit the working class the hardest. The main proposal to "fix" the education budget advocates raising the limits on local property and income taxes.

Tellingly, this regressive tax proposal is backed by Jesse Hagopian, the leader of the Social Equity Educators faction of the Seattle Education Association and member of the International Socialist Organization. At the strike authorization vote in August, Hagopian spoke like a capitalist politician, telling teachers, "Once the contract is signed, we build a campaign to pass the local school levy and immediately begin organizing to get all WEA locals to demand that the legislature

lift the levy lid and finally fulfill their obligation to fully fund education."

The Democrats' proposals are especially grotesque considering their eagerness to give huge tax cuts to major corporations. Democratic Governor Jay Inslee engineered the largest corporate tax cut in US history in 2016, handing over \$8.7 billion to Boeing, the Washington-based airline manufacturer and defense contractor.

In the ten years following the financial crash of 2008, the corporate and financial elite and its Democratic and Republican representatives have engineered the greatest transfer of wealth at the expense of the working class. While the two Washington residents and richest people in the world, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates, have seen their combined personal wealth surpass \$240 billion, school funding in the state rose by only 2.7 percent between 2008 and 2015.

Teachers must reject the absurd lie that there is no money for public education, and that any improvements in wages and conditions must be acquired by heavier burdens on the working class. They have no reason to accept the scraps of long-overdue pay increases, which the government and unions used to pit teachers in each district and state against one another.

The fight to defend public education and secure the rights of teachers requires a frontal assault on the wealth of the ruling elite. This can only be achieved through the independent organization and political mobilization of the entire working class against the capitalist system.

The independent initiative of educators, against the isolation of the unions and dictates of the government and corporations, must find organized expression through the building of rank-and-file school committees. These committees will be tasked with opening up coordination between teachers, students and families in every district, in order to prepare a common struggle in defense of public education, along with other social rights like health care, decent jobs, and affordable housing.

The fight for education waged by teacher committees will intersect with the emerging economic and political struggles of growing sections of the working class—such as workers at Amazon and UPS, and in the auto, airline, health and service industries—along with the fight in defense of immigrants and refugees, against internet censorship, police violence, and imperialist war.

Far from being over, the teachers' struggle has just begun. The working class battles that are re-emerging after decades of artificial suppression will require the building of a mass workers' movement in opposition to the entire capitalist system and for the socialist reorganization of economic life.



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