

# School support workers vote to strike in rural district in Washington state

**Hector Cordon**  
**6 November 2018**

School support staff in the North Thurston Public School (NTPS) district in Washington state voted to authorize strike action last week against the refusal of the district to provide adequate wage increases and a state law prohibiting public employees from striking. With nearly 15,000 students the district encompasses 74 square miles of small towns and rural areas immediately east of the city of Olympia, the state capital.

Over 130 members of the North Thurston Association of Office and Technical Professionals (NTAOTP) voted by a 78 percent margin to authorize a strike. Negotiations for a new contract have been ongoing since June with the contract expiring at the end of August.

This action comes roughly two months after a wave of walkouts and strike votes by Washington teachers swept the Democratic Party-controlled state. In each struggle, the Washington Education Association (WEA) isolated teachers within their own locale and came to separate district-by-district agreements in order to prevent a statewide walkout similar the ones that hit West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states earlier this year.

In Seattle, the largest school district in the state, teachers had voted by 98 percent to authorize strike action. A strike by the 5,000 Seattle teachers would have galvanized a movement for a state-wide walk-out and quickly led to a confrontation with the Democrats, who control both houses of the state legislature and the office of the governor under Jay Inslee.

The Seattle Education Association (SEA) forced teachers to work when classes restarted after summer vacation and pushed through a rotten contract with a 10.5 percent wage increase—much lower than many other districts, and which failed to address years of stagnant wages and rising housing and other living expenses.

With rank-and-file teachers engaging in the largest rebellion by educators in decades, the main concern of the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) was to prevent the long-simmering anger of teachers from boiling over into a nation-

wide strike against the attacks on public education being spearheaded by both big business parties, with the backing of the unions.

After selling out these strikes, the AFT and NEA peddled the lie that the election of Democrats in the mid-term elections would reverse the attack on teachers and public education. But the Democrats no less than the Republicans are the enemies of teachers and public education. This has been demonstrated by the promotion of charter schools, merit pay and other corporate-backed “school reform” schemes by the Obama administration and state and local governments controlled by the Democrats across the US.

A mass strike of teachers across Washington could have shifted the momentum, breaking through the paralysis imposed by the union and providing leadership to other workers in struggle, such as UPS, Amazon, postal workers, and teachers in Los Angeles, who have been kept on the job after voting near unanimously to strike.

The NEA and the AFT’s policies are not guided by the needs of their membership, but rather by the huge payouts to its top leaders. NEA head Lily Eskelsen Garcia takes in \$317,826 while AFT president Randi Weingarten makes \$557,875. Garcia and Weingarten are within the top two percent and one percent respectively of income earners in the US. This is what is behind political alliance with the Democratic Party, support for the capitalist system and hostility to any challenge by the working class to ever worsening levels of social inequality.

A critical role in betraying teachers has also been played by the Social Equity Educators, centered in Seattle. Allied with the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, whose leading member Jesse Hagopian is a prominent figure in the union faction, SEE provided a left cover for the union by insisting teachers look to the union to take their fight forward, even as the Seattle and Washington state unions were isolating and betraying the struggle.

According to the WEA—to which the North Thurston clerical and technical union is affiliated—unless the North Thurston school district sets negotiations earlier than the

currently scheduled November 27, the local has threatened that “a strike could be called before that date if no progress is made.” The WEA's website also noted that education support professionals continue negotiations in other districts, including the nearby cities of Tumwater and Olympia.

At issue is \$1.8 million that the Washington State legislature appropriated, under the Supreme Court's McCleary decision, to fund wage increases for education support professionals in the district. The school board is maintaining that 80 percent of that money go to fund other programs and purchases, offering only about \$350,000 for pay increases. While the legislature provided \$2 billion extra statewide to satisfy the Supreme Court ruling, it did not specifically require that this amount be directed entirely toward pay increases.

The school board is claiming that under the legislature's new restrictions on using local levies to support school employee pay, “...NTPS will experience a substantial reduction in our ability to collect local levies which helps funds staff salaries. The new state funding formula and other changes currently create challenging budget dynamics statewide.”

As with the strikes that erupted across Washington at the beginning of the school year, the WEA is seeking to keep the struggles of support staff isolated. Despite the fact that support staff are currently engaged in negotiations in multiple districts, the WEA has blocked any united struggle. In particular, in the context of the mid-term elections, the union has been determined to avoid any challenge to its efforts to return a Democratic majority in Congress and any disruption of union's support to the Democratic-dominated state government.

A case in point was the strike by teachers in the adjacent city of Tumwater—less than five miles from North Thurston's administrative office—that began September 1 and continued for two weeks. Support staff in Tumwater were and are still in negotiations with the school district. Members of the same union, the WEA, were bogged down in negotiations, while another section struck and defied threats from the school board and a court order to return to work. In the small cities of Tumwater and Battle Ground and in larger Tacoma as well, teachers courageously defied back-to-work orders by the courts, rallying outside school district headquarters with chants, in Battle Ground, of “it's not over.”

In Tacoma, the third largest school district in the state, school board officials announced in mid-October the “first phase” of lay-offs to start addressing a budget deficit claimed to be \$23.4 million. The initial elimination of 19 administrative positions will be followed by more job cuts. According to the *News Tribune*, “Another seven positions

will be eliminated in the first round of cuts, with more—officials say they aren't sure how many—to follow throughout the school year.”

A “second phase” of layoffs may follow with classroom positions. The board has stated that it would include cutting support services and school programs in its plans. Superintendent Carla Santorno, appointed by former Democratic Mayor Marilyn Strickland, threatened teachers, parents and students, stating, “We're going to lose things that are important to people that they didn't want to see go and they're really going to be upset about it.”

This threat is a forewarning of next year's contract negotiations: After teachers gained a 14 percent wage increase with a seven-day strike, a struggle that won significant support from large layers of workers, students and parents, the district is intent on undermining that support by portraying personnel and program cuts as the fault of the teachers, while preparing to demand significant concessions once negotiations begin.

The response of the union was to spread complacency among the rank-and-file while supporting the school board in its attacks on jobs and education. Tacoma Education Association President Angel Morton said, “... Certainly it's not anything to celebrate when people's jobs get eliminated, but it's my impression ... that (district officials) are being very thoughtful with how they go about it.”

With the state-wide restriction of local levies, many cities will be preparing similar campaigns. Seattle Public Schools threatened last August to implement layoffs in case of a budget shortfall.

While state and local politicians cry broke, both parties continue to shower billions in tax cuts on Boeing, Amazon and other corporate giants. At the same time, Washington state resident Jeff Bezos, Amazon CEO and the richest man in the world, has a personal fortune of \$168 billion.

Teachers and other school workers can only develop a genuine fight through building new organizations of struggle, independent of the NEA and AFT, to forge a united fight with every other section of the working class to defend the right to public education and good pay and secure jobs for all workers. The achievement of these rights will not be possible without a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate and financial oligarchy that rules America.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**