

Teacher unions in Washington state back Democrats' regressive school taxes

Kayla Costa**31 December 2018**

Months after the statewide struggle waged by teachers in Washington state, the Democratic Party and the teacher unions are uniting to implement regressive taxes in the name of funding public education.

Earlier in December, Democratic Governor Jay Inslee released a budget proposal for 2019-2021 that claims to meet pressing social needs in the state, especially education. The proposal is for \$54 billion in total expenditures, a 20 percent increase from the 2017 budget. This would be funded by a meager capital gains tax and an expansion of the state's preexisting regressive tax system.

The capital gains tax would take nine percent of the revenue made from selling investments, such as stocks and rental properties, excluding homes, farms, forestry land, and retirement accounts. These taxes are only projected to raise \$1 billion for the next two years. Another \$2.6 billion is expected to be raised from a proposed increase of the tax rate on professional and middle-class business services, and other funding would come from minor changes to out-of-state retail taxes and real estate sales.

Even though the proposal would only have a minor impact on the massive wealth of business owners, corporate executives and investors, the governor's capital gains tax proposal faces stiff opposition from state Republicans and sections of the Democratic Party who claim that the proposal violates the state constitution. Washington, which is one of only a handful of states that bans personal and corporate income taxes, raises 60 percent of its revenue from property and sales taxes.

The same hostility to any inroads on wealth of the rich was seen in Arizona earlier in the year, when the state Supreme Court shut down the "Invest for Ed" ballot measure to fund education from an income tax of

up to 5 percent on those making over \$500,000 a year.

Inslee, who handed over the biggest corporate tax cut in history to Washington-based Boeing (\$8.7 billion) in 2015, has proposed several regressive taxation measures. For education funding specifically, Inslee proposes removing the cap on local levy taxes that was passed in 2017. Local levies, which primarily consist of additional sales and property taxes, have increasingly filled the gap as state and federal funding declined over the last decade. These are tacked on to the state and federal taxes families already pay.

In August, teachers across Washington state were engaged in bitter struggles with local school districts over pay increases and school funding, with educators in at least a dozen districts going on strike despite facing threats of legal retaliation.

Fed up with living one paycheck away from financial disaster and witnessing the social crisis in their own schools, teachers and school staff expressed widespread support for a statewide strike similar to earlier struggles in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states.

Educators also had a rare opportunity to launch a statewide strike since local districts were negotiating simultaneously. Contract periods are usually staggered for educators by district and occupation, but in 2018, the pay increases were legally enforced by the state Supreme Court, after it ruled in the 2012 *McCleary* decision that the underfunding of public education, led by the Democrats over the past several decades, violated the state constitution.

Because of the *McCleary* decision, the Washington legislature doled out a one-time \$5 billion for education overall, one billion of which were designated for teacher salaries. Districts granted an average 11 percent raise, but this did little to overcome years of stagnating wages and skyrocketing living expenses, let alone

address their demands for increased funding for their students.

However, the aspirations of teachers ran up against the wall of the union apparatus, which isolated teachers district-by-district and then shut down the struggle before it could turn into a statewide fight. WEA leaders repeatedly stated that only Democratic candidates could “fix the inequities” in education and urged educators to campaign and vote for local Democrats. The union also urged the 2019 legislative session to restore “much-needed local levy flexibility.”

On December 13, WEA President Kim Mead claimed that the governor’s proposal for regressive local taxes would “allow school districts and voters to meet the specific needs of their students beyond state-funded basic education.” The union president praised the governor’s “strong record of support for public schools” and said nothing about how the Democrats oversaw the defunding of education in order to fund tax cuts for the rich.

The WEA’s betrayal of the teachers’ strike was aided and abetted by supposed “union activists” who are members of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), Socialist Alternative, and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Jesse Hagopian, a Seattle teacher and ISO member in the Social Equity Educators faction of the Seattle Education Association, told educators to accept the insulting 10.5 percent salary increase and focus on appealing to politicians to pass the regressive tax increases. “Once the contract is signed,” Hagopian said, “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.”

Socialist Alternative posted a September statement from Seattle teacher Matthew Maley, who advanced a strategy of pressuring the Democratic Party and the “left in the union,” referring to the Social Equity Educators (SEE), to fight for progressive income taxes and closing tax loopholes. The DSA declared the union-imposed sellouts a “victory,” gave support to Hagopian and SEE, and ran a number of Democratic Party candidates in Washington for the midterm elections.

The contending factions in the state government are both hostile to the interests of workers. With the local levy cap in place, districts threaten budget cuts and staff layoffs to compensate for inadequate state and federal

funding. With the removal of the levy caps, districts plan to expand regressive taxes in their area. Workers lose and the elite gain either way.

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.

Instead of being subordinated to the dictates of the ruling class, teachers and workers must take the fight into their own hands, by building new organizations of struggle independent of the unions, to mobilize teachers and every section of workers in a common struggle against the dictatorship of the banks and giant corporations. The mobilization of educators and the working class as a whole must be combined with a new political strategy in opposition to both corporate-controlled parties and based on a genuine socialist program, including seizing the vast fortunes of the corporate and financial oligarchy to fully fund public education and other vital social needs.



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