

Teachers walking out statewide today in Oregon

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Tens of thousands of teachers in the US state of Oregon will participate today in walkouts and rallies across the state. The Oregon educators, who will be joined by students and parents, are part of a global struggle of teachers demanding an end to the chronic underfunding of public schools. Many districts have cancelled school due to a shortage of substitute teachers.

Teachers throughout the country will recognize the most crucial factors driving Oregon educators to walk out: large class sizes, inadequate staffing, high student ratios for nurses and school psychologists, slashed programs like Special Education and Arts, and stagnant wages. In 2018, nearly 380,000 teachers went on strike in the US, with educators making up the bulk of the record number of striking workers since 1986. Another 70,000 have struck this year, including in West Virginia, Los Angeles, Oakland and Denver.

These conditions are shared by the hundreds of thousands of teachers who have engaged in strikes in recent months in Poland, Morocco, France, Algeria and Mexico, to name only a handful of countries. In every instance, the aspirations of educators come into conflict with the politicians and union bureaucracies that serve the financial elite. This makes ever more urgent the fight to build independent rank-and-file committees to unite all teacher struggles into a common offensive to secure quality education.

These widespread school conditions result from a decades-long campaign by the ruling capitalist class to protect corporate profits and wage war at the expense of the social programs, wages, benefits and living conditions of the working class.

In Oregon, the state government has underfunded public schools by 24 percent to 38 percent since the Quality Education Commission (QEC) first began

recording the figures in the 1990s. The QEC suggests that a minimum of \$10.7 billion is needed for public schools to provide a high-quality education from preschool to graduation, requiring \$2.5 billion be added to the \$8.2 billion allocated in the previous 2017-2019 budget.

District administrations are planning major cuts to local operating budgets, racked by a budget crisis that has its roots in the record transfer of wealth from the bailout of the Wall Street banks, which caused the 2008 crash. Though many districts have not released their proposed budgets for the next biennium yet, it appears these cuts will hit Portland metro-area schools and their 150,000 students the hardest.

Faced with a \$35 million shortfall, Beaverton Public Schools plans to eliminate 300 staff positions, including 200 teachers, along with professional development training and programs for English-language learners. Portland Public Schools will cut 45 teaching positions to make up for a \$13 million shortfall.

As in every state, teachers in Oregon face a bipartisan attack on public education. Democrats have held the majority of state government positions since 1988, though often by a slim majority, with Republicans dominating the rural eastern part of the state. Due to the tax cuts and incentives handed out to the corporate and financial aristocracy by both parties, tax revenues from corporations like Nike and Daimler Trucks are expected to hit a four-decade low this year even through profits are at a record high.

Despite the vast sums of wealth at the top of society, Democratic legislators and union officials propose a mere 0.57 percent business tax on sales over \$1 million, affecting less than ten percent of businesses. This bill, called the Student Success Act, would allocate \$1

billion annually to local districts across the state by 2020, with no guarantees that the money will go toward the greatest demands.

While most Republican politicians aim to make cuts to the state pension system (PERS) instead, Democratic Governor Kate Brown and the OEA unions have thrown their full support behind this bill, which many educators correctly recognize to be a pittance that will not resolve the crisis in public education.

The National Education Association (NEA), to which the OEA state and local unions belong, has worked to isolate the burgeoning struggles of educators and channel their energy back behind those responsible for the public-school crisis, especially the Democratic Party.

Democrats at the federal, state and local levels have fully participated in the assault on public education. Indeed, the Obama administration's Race-to-the-Top scheme, promotion of charter schools and victimization of teachers have paved the way for the Trump administration's all-out attack on public schools.

When they were unable to prevent teachers from striking, the unions ensured that teachers did not unite in a common struggle with educators in other districts or states engaged in the same battle. Instead they quickly pushed through sellout agreements that did not meet teachers' demands. This is the pattern of all the major struggles by teachers in the past year, including most recently in Oakland, Los Angeles, and Denver.

Oregon teachers can learn many lessons from educators to the north in Washington state, who face widespread layoffs and budget cuts after their brave strikes in September were isolated and ultimately defeated by the unions.

With school districts in Washington preparing mass layoffs and budget cuts, the Democratic Party-controlled state legislature passed a budget that provides a one-time infusion of cash and lifts the cap on regressive local property taxes. While shifting the tax burden onto the backs of working and middle-class people, Democratic Governor Jay Inslee handed the largest tax cut in history—\$8.7 billion—to aircraft giant Boeing, while Washington-based Amazon, owned by the world's richest man, paid \$0 in federal taxes on \$11 billion in profits last year.

The attack on public education has a direct relationship to rising levels of social inequality. As

schools endure blows to programs and staffing, the lives of students as well as teachers have been impacted by soaring costs of rent, homelessness, poverty, and drug and alcohol addiction, stress and other health issues.

As teachers struggle to secure the funding necessary for high-quality public education for all students, their aspirations come into direct conflict with the financial and corporate aristocracy and corporate-backed politicians, who constantly defend the lie that there is no money for schools.

Instead of pleading to the upper strata of society that has benefitted from the growth of inequality and austerity, educators must launch their own initiative to demand the massive redistribution of wealth to bring money back to the working class and its collective social needs. This necessarily entails breaking out of the isolation and subordination to the political establishment promoted by the unions, and instead creating rank-and-file committees that can unite all educators, workers, parents and students in a common fight across the United States and internationally.

Tens of millions the world over are coming to understand that meeting society's needs is incompatible with the capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of life to the ever-greater enrichment of the corporate and financial elite.

A fundamental change in society's priorities will not be accomplished by appealing to the powers-that-be and their representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties to increase their taxes and create a more humane capitalism.

The working class must build a powerful political movement against both corporate-controlled parties to fight for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of economic and political life. This will include the expropriation of the ill-gotten fortunes of the rich, a vast redistribution of wealth, and an infusion of resources to raise the material and cultural level of the entire population.



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