

One year after Washington state strikes, layoffs and cuts propel educators into new fight

Kayla Costa, Diana Green
21 August 2019

As the new school year approaches in Washington state, negotiations are currently taking place in over 100 school districts with local affiliates of the Washington Education Association (WEA). Teacher anger has been propelled by layoffs and budget cuts throughout the state in the aftermath of the union betrayal of militant teacher protests and strikes in more than a dozen districts last August and September.

Rallies are scheduled this week in some districts including Seattle, and teachers have authorized strike action in smaller districts like La Center, Kennewick and Toutle Lake. Educators' demands include pay increases to meet the cost of living, smaller class sizes, adequate staffing, including for psychologists and nurses and full funding for school programs, especially those for low-income students and special education.

In other words, teachers in Washington state have seen little change in school conditions since the union shut down last year's powerful walkouts without meeting any of the essential demands of educators. The strikes—initiated in the aftermath of a \$7.3 billion settlement in the long-running *McCleary* lawsuit over chronically underfunded schools—spread from district to district and were accompanied by demands for statewide and national walkouts.

The statewide education crisis is on a trajectory to worsen in the coming years. According to statistical analysis by the *Seattle Times*, “253 of the 295 districts expect to face a budget shortfall this upcoming school year... More than a third of all districts anticipate drawing down their entire cash reserves through 2022. And though school districts are required by law to have balanced budgets, some even project their reserves will fall into negative territory.”

Districts have proposed punitive measures to deal with budget shortfalls, affecting about one-third of districts. From Vancouver to Seattle, many boards have already imposed layoffs of teachers, administrative jobs, librarians and support staff, including:

- Vancouver Public Schools faces an \$8 million deficit, even after choosing to cut 10 support teaching positions, one grounds maintenance position and budgets relating to central office operations and professional development.
- Battle Ground Schools faces an \$8 million deficit, to be offset by eliminating 44 staff positions and cutting budgets for supplies and professional services.
- Spokane Public Schools faces a deficit of around \$40 million,

to be offset by cutting 9 teaching positions and 60 classified jobs like librarians, after threatening 325 layoffs in April.

- Tacoma Public Schools faces a \$30 million reduction in funding, to be offset by slashing 43 administrative positions.
- Olympia School District faces a \$8.5 million deficit, to be offset by cutting 29 teaching positions.
- Seattle Public Schools originally faced a \$78.4 million deficit, with plans to cut hours or eliminate 90 positions across the schools. After using local levy funds to lower the deficit, the cuts have been reduced for all but central office employees.

This gives a snapshot of what the Democratic controlled political establishment has planned for public education across Washington state, reflecting national and international trends. Unsurprisingly, teachers are angry and determined to defend jobs and recoup losses.

Though teachers are prepared to fight, the Tacoma Education Association President Angel Morton told reporters that there is “really no likelihood of a strike at all.”

Instead, the unions aim to suppress the outbreak of struggle, fearing its implications. They make no mention of the powerful potential of last year's struggles or the broader issues of the systematic destruction of public education.

They have focused primarily on salary increases in negotiations, with little to no substantive details provided to teachers or parents. In Seattle, an emphasis is also being placed on “racial equity,” seeking to explain educational inequality through racial politics and the lack of “teachers of color” to match the demographics of the student body.

Whenever the unions mention the layoffs and cuts, they blame the budget crisis on local tax restrictions, using it as a means to enforce localism and bolster the Democratic Party.

In order to understand the real roots of the crisis and thus what must be done to fight against it, a review of the last year's experience is essential.

Last year's strikes were sparked by the state Supreme Court's decision in the *McCleary* case, which mandated the legislature to inject \$7.3 billion into the education budget with around \$1 billion designated for teacher salary increases. After the unions consciously sought to isolate teachers by district and cut off strikes, educators went into the school year with one to two year contracts that mostly focused on short-term pay hikes.

The Washington legislature decided to pay for the short-term *McCleary* “fix” by increasing statewide property taxes, which they tried to offset with caps on local collection of levy property taxes. With one of the most regressive state tax systems in the United States, local districts in Washington have relied on levies to offset chronic federal and state underfunding of education at the hands of both pro-corporate parties.

In late April, the cap was set at a maximum of \$2.50 for every thousand dollars in property value, with a higher alternative minimum for districts with more than 40,000 students. While technically the wealthiest residents will pay more taxes on their luxury homes, property taxes hit working class homeowners the hardest. The tax is tied to the market value of each home, which has rapidly climbed in the past decade, while workers’ wages and retiree benefits fall behind.

The WEA unions, district administrations and state Democrats have all blamed the education budget crisis on these levy lids. Without raising regressive taxes, they claim, there is no possible way to prevent budget cuts and layoffs.

Unsurprisingly the pseudo-lefts back the line of the unions and Democrats. Kshama Sawant, the Socialist Alternative member in the Seattle City Council, suggested in an April letter to Seattle educators that raising levy lids promotes “democratic flexibility” for public education. Running for a third term as a Council Member, she was endorsed by the Seattle Education Association (SEA) in June.

Jesse Hagopian, of the Social Equity Educators (SEE) caucus in the Seattle Education Association (SEA) and the now-defunct International Socialist Organization, takes a similar approach. When thousands of Seattle educators gathered downtown for a strike authorization vote last August, with the potential to lead the way for a unified statewide struggle, Hagopian attempted to channel teachers’ militancy into bourgeois politics.

“Once the contract is signed,” he stated, “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.”

Teachers must certainly reject the absurd lie that there is no money for public education. But equally ridiculous is the claim that any improvements in wages and conditions must be acquired by placing heavier burdens on the working class.

The heavy reliance on property and sales taxes as well as the lack of any income tax (including on the rich) makes the state funding of all public services, as well as schools, a financial burden on the working class.

The funding for public education is not to come from regressive taxes on the working class, but from the hands of the corporate executives and financial elite. These oligarchs are making billions off the artificial inflation of the stock market, attacks on living standards and the slashing of jobs. Meanwhile, the international working class confronts conditions of increasing poverty, desperation and instability.

Seattle is now the fifth most expensive city in the country. As teachers and workers generally have struggled to make ends meet, major corporations like Boeing, Amazon, Microsoft and Google are handed tax cuts and given free rein to develop the city in their

interests. 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.

There is no local or state solution for the budget crisis, nor is there a solution in the framework of capitalism. Instead, the fight to defend public education and secure the rights of teachers requires a direct assault on the wealth of the ruling elite, demanding that society be run to provide the working class with what it needs rather than what the ruling elites say they can afford.

Over the last two years teachers across the US have shown their willingness to fight with strikes and mass actions from Oakland and Los Angeles to West Virginia and Oklahoma. These sentiments are shared by teachers internationally, from Ghana to Australia. As the global struggle of teachers continues to grow in 2019, the local struggles of educators must unify into a powerful common movement of the working class.

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 committees. These committees will be tasked with opening up coordination between teachers, students and families in every district, in order to 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 logically intersect with the emerging economic and political struggles of growing sections of workers—such as workers at Amazon, and in the auto, airline, health and service industries—along with mass opposition to attacks on immigrants and refugees, internet censorship, police violence and imperialist war.

Washington teachers must draw the lessons of the teachers struggles of the last two years and take the necessary steps to join the broader political fight that is required to secure a high-quality public education for every student and a decent job for every educator.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact