

Teachers set to strike in southern Alaska

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Teachers in southern Alaska will begin striking on Tuesday, joining the continuing movement of teachers in the US and around the globe who have, over the past two years, come out in force to fight for decent wages and benefits and better conditions for students. Educators in the 42 schools of the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD) in southern Alaska had already voted by 75 percent in favor of strike again in the district that serves 9,000 students. The Kenai teachers have been working without a contract for more than 441 days and took the strike vote more than four months ago.

Bargaining between the two sides has continued for almost two years. The Kenai school district is located in the South Central region of Alaska, the state's most populous area, which includes the city of Anchorage.

The union's last offer would raise district health care payments by \$3,000 per employee per year compared to the district's counter. The district alleges that the difference would cost an additional \$3.2 million per year overall, which it contends it can't afford. Under the district's plan, employees would be expected to pay \$455 per month in health care costs versus about half of that under the union's plan.

The Kenai Peninsula Education Association (KPEA), which represents the nearly 1,100 district teachers and support staff, released a statement on its Facebook page Friday announcing the strike. The statement read, "We have said since May that we don't want to strike, but we will. The failure of the KPBSD to adequately address the Association's primary concern of affordable healthcare premiums for public school employees continues to hinder an acceptable agreement." The statement further contended that teachers were striking as the District "could not come to the table with an offer that would lower healthcare premium costs to a level commensurate to comparable districts in Alaska."

In exchange for concessions on the issue of health care, the union relinquished a previously agreed upon raise of two percent for all employees in fiscal year 2021, meaning that teachers will not receive any wage increases regardless of the outcome of the strike.

While the KPEA is framing the teachers' struggle as an isolated battle between the union and the district, the attacks on Alaska teachers are part of a broader drive of state and federal governments to gut public education.

Last July, the administration of Republican Governor Mike Dunleavy issued 182 line item vetoes to cut \$444 million in the budget passed by the Alaska state legislature. The cuts included more than \$130 million from the University of Alaska alone, amounting to a 41 percent cut to the university's budget. In a letter to the Alaska Legislature, Sonny Rumaswamy, president of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, warned that "failure to fund these institutions could have disastrous effects, including the potential loss of accreditation that could be felt for generations."

Dunleavy also vetoed a one-time \$30 million funding boost for K-12 education along with a cut of \$8.6 million in funding for the state's Head Start early childhood education program, effectively eliminating it. Advanced funding for K-12 schools in the 2020-2021 school year was removed along with \$800,000 in cuts to funding for "Online with Libraries" and "Live Homework Help," eliminating those programs as well.

An ongoing legal battle is underway to restore the \$30 million in K-12 funding, however, the KPEA has already given up its demand for a 2 percent wage increase, already lower than the rate of inflation, regardless of the outcome of the lawsuit.

Massive cuts to health care were also proposed including the elimination of Medicaid dental coverage for adults, along with \$50 million from Medicaid on top of a \$70 million cut already approved by the

legislature. Behavioral health treatment programs were also reduced by \$6.1 million. Massive cuts were also made to the Alaska State Council on the Arts and public broadcasting, to pollution inspection programs, public assistance for senior citizens, the blind, disabled and the homeless.

Dunleavy relented on a portion of the cuts in August, however, millions have still been cut from all the proposed areas. The cuts to the University system were reduced to \$70 million over the course of three years, a devastating cut that will inevitably result in the loss of many academic programs. This includes the university's renowned climate change research programs which involve the collaborations of scientists and students from around the globe especially given the close proximity of the campuses to the Arctic Circle.

The budget situation in Alaska is being watched very closely, with state governments and the Trump administration hoping to use it as a template for similar efforts to massively slash social programs across the country. In fact, the Dunleavy administration's outgoing budget director Donna Arduin had occupied similar positions in California and Florida, advocating massive cuts in those states as well when they experienced budget deficits during the 2008–2009 financial crisis.

Recent polls show that more than 60 percent of Alaska residents support overturning the cuts. Moreover, a recent petition drive to recall governor Dunleavy has already gathered more than 50,000 signatures in a state with a total population of less than 740,000 people.

A struggle to defend public education and other vital services depends upon the development of an independent political movement of the working class in opposition to both the Democrats and Republicans. The entire strategy of the unions is based on appeals to the same capitalist politicians who are responsible for implementing the cuts. The complicity of the unions in the Dunleavy administration's austerity drive was in fact underscored by their complete silence as the budget was proposed and later passed.

Under these conditions of mass hostility to cuts, the strike of Kenai Peninsula teachers takes on immense significance as a starting point for a working class counteroffensive. This requires that teachers break out of the straitjacket imposed by the unions and develop

their own independent initiative through the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace. These committees should reach out to other sections of workers as well as parents and students to develop their struggle on the widest possible basis.



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