

Potential teachers' strike in Champion Township, Ohio

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On July 15, the Champion Education Association (CEA) filed an intent to strike notice with the Ohio State Employment Relations Board (SERB). If no agreement is reached between the CEA and Champion Local School District, the strike of 92 educators in Trumbull County will begin on August 16, which is also the first day teachers are slated to return to the classroom.

According to David Mahan, the vice president of the Champion School Board, the board and CEA have been negotiating a contract for roughly three months. Negotiations broke down after the CEA proposed that pandemic relief money be used to increase teachers' salaries, which the board flatly rejected.

Teachers in the district have worked throughout the pandemic with a measly two percent salary increase, after the CEA and district agreed in 2019 to extend the previous contract by one year. However, inflation in 2020 alone was roughly 1.25 percent, making the pay increase for educators basically non-existent.

Despite outbreaks of COVID-19 in the district, teachers did not receive extra pay through the relief funds. Some of the funds were allocated to the county Sheriff's Office, part of which funded hazard pay for officers.

On July 22, the CEA released a statement requesting that the district reach a "fair and equitable contract." In the statement the CEA also says, "We look forward to working together to ensure that teachers are back in the classroom on August 16." In an attempt to reach an agreement and prevent a strike, the CEA and district administration will soon meet for negotiations along with a federal mediator.

The actions of the CEA are a textbook example of how the union bureaucracies work to avoid a strike when possible or keep them isolated when a strike does

emerge. This includes the CEA's appeals to federal mediators, which regularly side with employers, as a means of rapidly reaching an agreement before the strike would begin.

At the same time, the CEA has refused to make any appeal to broader sections of educators and school employees in Ohio and across the United States. The CEA's official website does not include any information about the union's activities after 2014, and news of the potential strike has been limited to a single report in a local news outlet.

In the paperwork to the Ohio SERB, the CEA also specified that they were filing a "Notice of Intent to Strike Only" and do not intend to form picket lines. The strike will also take place after a contract between the district and support staff union, Champion School Support Association (CSSA), has already been reached.

While there are relatively few teachers in Champion Township, the possibility of a strike is a reflection of growing anger among educators and school employees throughout the pandemic. In Ohio alone, during the pandemic there has been a strike of faculty at Youngstown State University and a sickout of bus drivers near Dayton, while potential strikes by teachers in Streetsboro and Cleveland Heights were called off at the last minute by their respective unions.

Undoubtedly there is a concern that a strike of teachers in Champion Township could galvanize a broader struggle of educators, many of whom are highly concerned about the surge of COVID-19 cases over the summer and the recent restructuring of Ohio's funding for public education.

On Saturday, the Ohio Department of Health reported 687 new COVID-19 cases and 49 hospitalizations, with many attributing the spike to the spread of the more contagious Delta variant. As of this writing, only 46

percent of Ohio's population are fully vaccinated and only 49 percent have received at least one dose of a COVID vaccine.

Despite the uptick of cases, the low vaccination rate and recommendations from the health department that unvaccinated students, teachers and staff wear masks, Republican Governor Mike DeWine has specified that he will not issue a mask mandate in schools. The failure to issue a mask mandate is in the same vein as the Biden administration and national teachers unions, which have encouraged schools to return to in-person learning as quickly as possible.

The state of Ohio has also recently overhauled its entire education funding system through the Fair School Funding Plan, which was included in the state budget passed in June. While the plan has been touted for supposedly increasing per-student funding, the central aspect of the plan is that it provides funding based on expenses, such as teacher salaries, technological updates, special needs education and others.

The current budget only accounts for \$12.4 billion this year and \$12.6 billion in 2023 being spent towards the education plan. Given that the education reform was passed alongside a budget that cuts income tax by three percent, it is entirely possible that the negative impact of the change in funding will be felt by students and teachers more in the future.

In the short term, the budget also siphons funding to charter schools by expanding eligibility and funding. According to the plan, children will now receive vouchers of \$5,000 for K-8 and \$7,500 for high school, an increase from \$4,650 for K-8 and \$6,000 for high school.

The suppression of strikes, reopening schools under unsafe conditions and expansion of charter schools are the direct outcome of the continued betrayals by the union bureaucracies. Any struggle by teachers to improve their living conditions and the situation facing their students requires them to organize independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by the teachers themselves, to oppose the unions which have prioritized shutting down strikes and to turn outwards to broader sections of educators and workers. The WSWS encourages Champion Township teachers to contact us today to begin forming a rank-and-file committee to carry out this struggle.



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