

Scranton, Pennsylvania teachers set to strike

Andrea Peters
2 November 2021

Some 800 teachers and paraprofessionals in Scranton, Pennsylvania, are set to go on strike Wednesday morning. The teachers, members of the Scranton Federation of Teachers (SFT), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have been working without a contract for five years. Starting salaries for educators in the 10,000-student school system are about \$37,000 a year.

Teachers are resisting being forced into a substandard health care plan that would require them to pay what they describe as “astronomical” deductibles that will run into the thousands of dollars annually, and they are demanding pay increases after years of wage stagnation and give-backs. With average inflation running over 5 percent, Scranton educators have seen their incomes fall the last half decade, even as they have grappled with larger class sizes, the gutting of student programming, and most recently, the illness, death, and strains associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The school system in President Biden’s hometown has been ravaged by the virtual collapse of the region’s steel and coal mining industries, and diversion of public funds to for-profit charter schools. The official poverty rate for 6-to-11-year-olds in the Scranton public schools is 37.3 percent, double the state’s rate.

In 2019, Pennsylvania’s Democratic governor, Tom Wolf, put Scranton schools under the state’s Recovery Plan and appointed a fiscal overseer to cut costs. Since then, more than 100 teachers and paraprofessionals have left the district, according to the SFT, leaving special needs students without enough teachers, and leading to a sharp increase in class sizes, which has been particularly dangerous during the pandemic.

Over the last year, many more educators have left the district, disgusted by the deplorable working conditions. District officials have demanded that remaining teachers take on a longer school day and courses outside of their areas of specialty to address the staff shortages created by endless cuts.

According to SFT President Rosemary Boland, the state’s Recovery Plan is “balancing the budget on the

backs of students” and “has not been amended to factor in the \$60 million in federal aid that should be used to stabilize the district and pay teachers decent, competitive wages.”

While the salaries of district administrators have grown by 25 percent, school officials have unilaterally refused to meet teachers’ demands, calling them a “futile attempt to achieve an unrealistic, unaffordable and unattainable goal.” In fact, the school district’s new annual budget includes no money for pay raises.

Nonetheless, the district claims it has offered the SFT raises totaling \$28.8 million, which it estimates would result in increased wages and benefits of between \$9,000 and \$28,000 per teacher. However, because these funds are not approved in the budget, they can only be realized by cuts to some other aspect of the school system.

Thus, even if the currently unfunded wage hikes offered by the district materialize, teachers will be forced to pay for them by working in ever-worse conditions due to a gutted budget. At the same time, the media will no doubt cast educators as greedy money-grubbers prepared to sacrifice the educational needs of students to earn more. In a bid to poison parents and city residents against the teachers, the district insists that the teachers’ demands would result in a 20 percent tax increase for Scranton residents.

In a statement, the district accused teachers of obstructing students’ “critical return to the familiarity and stability of the classroom,” essentially blaming educators for the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the SSD, working hand-in-glove with the SFT, forced teachers and students back to unsafe classrooms, school buses, and athletic activities in the midst of the pandemic, which continues to rage across the country and in Pennsylvania.

COVID-19 has killed 517 people in Lackawanna County, where Scranton is located, and has infected nearly 23,000, or one in nine residents. The county is still averaging 42 cases per day, and the test positivity rate is 8 percent. The *New York Times* pandemic tracker states that

COVID-19 presents “a very high risk for unvaccinated people” in Lackawanna County. Of course, the “unvaccinated people” are heavily concentrated among young school children.

In an especially vindictive and provocative act meant to crush the resistance of the educators, the School District announced Monday that it will cut off health insurance for all striking teachers. Educators and their families will face unaffordable medical bills, and some will be forced to postpone necessary treatment.

The district’s efforts to turn parents and workers in the community against the teachers has largely failed. Educators have broad and growing sympathy in this northeastern Pennsylvania working-class community of 70,000. Every effort must be made to draw wider sections of workers into the struggle—parents, students, and workers in other industries throughout the city.

“It’s not on the parent that parents should not be struggling; teachers should not be struggling,” parent Nicole Young told local media. “It’s not fair to them at all.”

“I think what they’re doing, it’s not right,” said another parent, Grace Martinez, referring to the district administrators. “I think they should give what they want, the teachers because it’s going to affect the kids in the long run.”

At a school board meeting earlier this week in which administrators were repeatedly booed, students spoke out in support of their teachers. “There can be no school district without the teachers, and this district is having a difficult time finding teachers who want to work. True leadership is respecting and taking care of the people who are doing the job,” said student Paxton Hartman. Another young person challenged the board for eliminating music classes.

Scranton’s educators cannot rely on the SFT, which has kept them on the job for a staggering five years without a contract, all the while collecting their dues as their living standards and working conditions collapsed, to prosecute their struggle. On November 1, AFT President Randi Weingarten issued a statement, declaring, “The educators have Scranton have gone 5 years without a contract—they, like the kids, have sacrificed because of the fiscal improprieties/mismanagement that led to the District being under State oversight. It’s time to treat students, families, and educators fairly,” she banally declared.

This is a whitewash for the role of AFT’s local affiliate, which has kept teachers on the job for five years without a new contract. It is also a cover-up for the Democratic

Party, with which the AFT and SFT are aligned. From Clinton’s “School Choice” to Obama’s Race to the Top, the Democrats, just like the Republicans, have overseen decades of savage austerity measures and school privatization schemes.

Far from waging a genuine struggle to defend teachers and public education, Weingarten (whose salary is roughly \$500,000 a year, or nearly 14 times a Scranton’s teacher’s starting wage) has spent the last four years rushing from state to state, along with her counterparts in the National Education Association, to isolate and shut down teacher strikes against austerity and inequality. Over the 10 months, AFT and NEA officials have worked closely with the Biden administration to herd teachers and students back into COVID-infected schools.

If the Scranton branch of the AFT has been forced to call a strike it only because it was unable to contain the anger of rank-and-file teachers. Its aim is to declare a “fair deal” won and wrap the whole thing up as soon as possible, insisting, as ever, that there was no better option.

Rank-and-file educators must take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the SFT and the AFT. Scranton educators should immediately form rank-and-file committees to advance their own demands and appeal to the community and thousands of educators in neighboring districts, across the state, and around the country for support. With a growing strike wave involving tens of thousands of workers in the US, there is enormous potential to build a mass movement in defense of public education and against the homicidal “let it rip” COVID-19 policies of both political parties.



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