

“We are asked to do more and more with less and less”

Striking Scranton, Pennsylvania teachers discuss deplorable school conditions

Our correspondents
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On Wednesday morning, some 800 Scranton, Pennsylvania public school teachers went on strike. The teachers, who are members of the Scranton Federation of Teachers (SFT), have been working without a contract for four years.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to educators on the picket line. Teachers and paraprofessionals in Scranton are angry. They have gone years without pay increases, while rising health care costs and inflation eat away at their salaries. But their primary concern is the decimation of public education in Scranton, a mid-sized industrial city in northeastern Pennsylvania. About two hours west of New York City, over one third of Scranton's elementary school-aged children are officially poor.

Matthew Loftus is a chemistry teacher with 23 years' experience. He described “disturbing changes” to education over the last five years, including the gutting of programs and basic services. “There's been a reduction in arts throughout the district,” he said. “Our library is shuttered, and our librarians have been dismissed.”

“The pay is the lowest in the area,” he went on. “Starting teachers are paid \$38,000 with \$2,000 in health care contributions, and paraprofessionals are paid \$24,000, also with \$2,000 in health care.”

Loftus said that he knew several teachers and paraprofessionals who contracted COVID-19 so far during the pandemic. “We were told to maintain three feet of social distance in the classroom, but that's not even possible in a lot of our classrooms.”

In its latest demonstration of how little the district cares about the basic health and safety of teachers and young people, the school board vindictively announced Monday it is cutting off the health insurance of teachers for the duration of the walkout. Both they and their children, whether grappling with a COVID infection, cancer

treatment, a broken limb, or another other medical need, will either forego care or be crippled by massive medical bills.

It is this sort of disrespect, Loftus said, that has led 100 teachers to leave the Scranton school district in the last five years alone.

James McCormick, who teaches environmental science at Scranton High School, also stressed the district's contemptuous attitude towards educators. “We are continually asked to do more and more with less and less,” he said. “They're adding more and more students and cutting teachers wherever possible.” During the “remote learning” phase of Pennsylvania's response to the pandemic, teachers were made responsible for delivering the same content, but to students who did not have access to proper technology.

Health care expenses are already costly for Scranton teachers, McCormick said, but now the district wants to force teachers onto a “substandard health care plan” that would require still greater out-of-pocket expenses.

Christine Walker is a sixth-grade teacher with 17 years of experience. She offered a harrowing description of educational decline in Scranton.

“Basically, the school district just gives us a room to teach in,” she said. “I have not been given any books to teach with in six years, not even a grammar book. We just make do with what we have, bringing in our own material.”

She said the old buildings in the district have windows that won't open and no air conditioning. On hot days, room temperatures can rise to 90 degrees.

“We've taken everything from our kids,” she said. “I have been here for 17 years, and in that time not one thing has gotten better. They even eliminated pre-school, though that cost the school district nothing. They just

wanted the classrooms.”

Among the things taken from Scranton middle school children in recent years: music, libraries, family and consumer science, and band.

“Our high school has seven kids in the marching band,” she said. “When I graduated 1987 there were 50 kids. But now the students can’t learn instruments, so how could they join the marching band. Years ago, we even had a string instruments program for fourth and fifth graders, but they took that away, too.”

Kay LaCoe, a fourth-grade teacher, chimed in. “They’ve taken the joy out of teaching.” She stressed the destructive role of standardized testing. “I have given my students three baseline tests. They spend hours in front of a computer screen. I don’t have time to do much else with them.”

This WWSWS correspondent asked teachers to respond to the claim, pushed by the school district, “that there is no money.” Teachers pointed to the six-figure salaries of the administrators and their “mismanagement” of school affairs.

Some expressed anger over the astronomical wealth piled up by America’s billionaires during the pandemic. When the WWSWS correspondent stressed the need to take up a political struggle against both the Republican and Democratic parties, one teacher said she felt “betrayed” by Governor Tom Wolf, a Democrat, and even more by President Joseph Biden.

Whenever Biden feels the need to falsely portray himself as some sort of friend of the working man, he points to his family roots in the area and describes himself as a Scranton “hometown boy” before running back to Washington to do the bidding of big business. “Biden says he’s from Scranton. But what has he done for us?” the teacher observed.

Teachers knew of the strike by Deere workers in the Midwest and were interested to hear workers voted down a second sellout contract by the United Auto Workers (UAW). They supported the idea of expanding their struggle and linking it up with teachers throughout the US and beyond.

The challenge confronting Scranton teachers is one of deepening their understanding that this is not a local struggle and the conditions they face are not just the product of the rotten actions of local politicians and school board administrators, no matter how truly terrible they are. Teachers across the US and internationally face the same reality—decades of budget cuts, stagnating wages, deadening curriculum. And now, they are being

made to work in COVID-19 breeding grounds that are unsafe for children and workers, based on the claim that school officials are concerned about the psychological and intellectual development of the young. But clearly those who force kids to “learn” in sweltering classrooms and cannot, in six years, find the money to give kids textbooks do not care about their wellbeing.

The Democratic Party, as much as the Republican, is the architect of this ongoing assault on public education. Not under Clinton, nor Obama, nor Biden has anything fundamentally improved for educators or children. Rather, everything has gotten worse.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), of which Scranton’s local union is a branch, has been partner to all of this. It has worked assiduously to shut down strikes and force through concessions contracts across the country, always claiming it was the best that could be done. It partnered with the Obama administration in the implementation of “Race to the Top” legislation and other attacks on teachers and public education.

The AFT and the National Education Association (NEA) are both major proponents of the ruling class’ pandemic “back to school” policy, which has led to hundreds of deaths of students and educators and unknown long-term health consequences for millions. In Scranton, the AFT branch has kept teachers working for a staggering five years without a contract.

The WWSWS calls for the formation of rank-and-file educators committees that will take the contract negotiations out of the hands of the SFT and AFT and wage an uncompromising struggle for gains for teachers and students—more pay, more positions, more funding. The claim that there is “no money” for any of this must be rejected out of hand. The problem is not that there is “no money,” but that the rich have all of it.

Above all, the Scranton strike must be expanded, with the city’s teachers linking up with educators and workers in other industries throughout the country in defense of the social rights of the working class.



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