

The way forward for striking Scranton teachers

**Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
4 November 2021**

On Wednesday, November 3, over 800 Scranton, Pennsylvania, educators walked out on strike, after more than four years without a contract. Starting teachers receive only \$38,000 a year, a poverty pay rate, coupled with an additional \$2,000 in health care contributions. Paraprofessionals receive only \$24,000 annually. Like their colleagues across the world, Scranton teachers have been forced into unsafe classrooms, contracted COVID-19, faced years of cuts to essential programs, and been abandoned by the politicians and the union.

Educators from Pennsylvania, Ohio and Maryland who have formed independent rank-and-file safety committees met on Thursday and unanimously endorsed this statement of support to the courageous Scranton strikers. We urge striking Scranton educators to join and build the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to carry your struggle forward! Sign up today to get involved at wsws.org/edsafety!

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee declares its solidarity with striking Scranton, Pennsylvania, teachers and calls for the broadest possible industrial and political action to support them. We condemn the provocative behavior of the Scranton School District, which has refused even the most minimal demands from teachers and paraprofessionals.

In an act of brazen and vindictive cruelty, the School District has cut off health care coverage to the striking educators. This act, akin to kicking striking coal miners out of company housing, jeopardizes the health and safety of teachers and their families—including children—in the middle of a pandemic that has claimed the lives of well over 750,000 Americans and 5 million worldwide.

Scranton teachers have not had contractual wages increased in years, even as out-of-pocket health care costs and inflation gobble up their paychecks. This situation is intolerable. It cannot be allowed to continue. Scranton teachers must be given substantial pay increases, including back pay to make up for years of wage stagnation, as well as fully paid health care.

Scranton teachers are fighting not only for their living and working conditions, but also for the learning conditions of their students. As is the case everywhere else in the US, as well as in most of the rest of the world, Scranton teachers have been forced to bear the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic, carrying on instruction so that corporations can continue to extract profit from students' parents. When the pandemic hit, Scranton teachers were

tasked with virtual teaching without adequate resources. With the terrible disease still taking the lives of educators and students, educators have been herded back into unsafe classrooms. Classrooms packed with 27 to 35 students do not permit even the minimal social distance of three feet and lack proper ventilation.

The Scranton School District has gutted education in this city for years. It has laid off scores of teachers and staff. It has taken the knife to preschool, art, music, marching band, and even the school libraries. If the district is not stopped, it will transform the city's classrooms into little more than daytime holding pens for the students.

The children in Scranton need more educational funding, not less. In Scranton, nearly one-fourth of households are below the official poverty rate, and at least half hover just above the poverty threshold. Social conditions are deplorable. A 2014 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that almost 20 percent of children in Scranton had dangerous levels of lead in their bodies. This figure is five times higher than the rate of lead poisoning among children in Flint, Michigan.

The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee rejects with contempt the claim put forth by the school district that "there is not enough money." There is plenty of money. It is being hoarded by the rich, who have seen their already astronomical wealth multiply during the pandemic, even as the bodies piled up in the working class. Pennsylvania is home to 17 billionaires, whose combined net worth is estimated at some \$55 billion! These 17 individuals command wealth that is seven times greater than Pennsylvania's entire 2021–2022 education budget, and it is 330 times the grossly inadequate 2021–2022 Scranton School District budget!

This raises a crucial point. No defense of education is possible outside of a struggle against the entrenched wealth of the American ruling class. But this requires a new political perspective. That perspective is socialism. Politicians of both parties have gutted education in Pennsylvania, and throughout the country, for the benefit of the rich. This is just as true of the Democratic Party as it is of the Republican Party. Pennsylvania's governor is a Democrat, Tom Wolf. The president of the United States, Joe Biden, is a Democrat who won the election on claims that he would help working people. Biden trots out that he was born in Scranton when he needs to pretend to have some connection to the working class. But his main policy has been to hand trillions of dollars to Wall Street, continuing where Donald

Trump and Barack Obama left off. This money for America's super-rich does not come out of thin air. It is milked out of the working class!

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent union of the Scranton Federation of Teachers (SFT), is fully integrated with the Democratic Party, and is completely committed to the defense of American capitalism, which, in turn, richly rewards the union bureaucracy for services rendered. AFT President Randi Weingarten—a sitting member of the Democratic National Committee—pockets a salary of \$500,000 per year for heading what is in all but name a profit-making empire, with scores and scores of “officials” who take home more than \$100,000 in compensation drawn from teachers’ union dues.

This reality determines the actions of the AFT. The union bureaucracy aims to block any struggle that threatens the present political and social set-up. This is proven by its unbroken record of betrayals of teachers’ struggles in recent years. Every time teachers have raised their heads up, the AFT, and its counterpart, the National Education Association (NEA), have rushed in to crush strikes. When the unions could not prevent strikes from occurring, they forced through betrayals which met none of the demands of educators. From West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona in 2019 to the massive opposition of educators against the unsafe reopening of schools, the unions have presided over the ongoing destruction of public education and teachers’ rights.

The AFT response to the pandemic is nothing short of criminal. The AFT and Weingarten have spearheaded the push to reopen schools, leading to the needless death of thousands of educators, staff, and students, and fueling pandemic surges throughout the country. The AFT refuses to even acknowledge the death of its own members from COVID-19 on its website. Instead, in September, Weingarten gave a platform to Open Schools USA and Jay Bhattacharya, one of the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration, which promotes the spread of COVID-19 among students.

The success of the Scranton teachers’ strike depends on expanding their struggle as widely as possible. A strike wave is emerging in the US and around the world, from autoworkers at Deere in the Midwest to Mack Volvo in Pennsylvania and Virginia, from nurses in hospitals in Massachusetts, Buffalo and Minnesota to miners in Alabama and metalworkers in South Africa. These struggles must be recognized for what they are: the common fight of the working class against the profit-mad capitalists.

The fight of the Scranton teachers must be linked up with these other struggles, and in particular the fight of educators across the US and internationally. The conditions facing Scranton teachers and students are terrible. But they are the same conditions facing teachers and students everywhere, and the working class as a whole—starting in Scranton itself. The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee expresses confidence that the traditions of struggle in this proud working-class city, the historic center of the anthracite coal mining industry, can and will be revived.

But unleashing the mighty force of the working class is precisely what the AFT bitterly opposes. For four years the AFT has kept

Scranton teachers on the job without a contract, violating the ancient labor tradition: “No contract, no work.” In that time, the SFT has jointly overseen the insufferable conditions facing teachers, which has caused 100 teachers and paraprofessionals to leave, eroding the size and strength of the workforce. As for the parent union, the AFT, teachers can have no confidence in a “union” that is in bed with the very politicians who have created the disaster in the first place!

The AFT has allowed a strike in Scranton only because rank-and-file anger can no longer be contained. The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee issues the following warning to Scranton teachers: The AFT has a tried-and-true playbook. Its aim is to keep the teachers out on strike as long as it takes to “blow off steam,” the better to bring them back on a rotten deal that will not address the cuts that have devastated education in the city or meet the needs of educators. This is exactly what the AFT and the SFT did five years ago. Conversely, the very moment the strike appears to be gaining strength will be the moment that the AFT will intervene to shut it down. The AFT fears that a spark from a city like Scranton could ignite a fire that spreads to schools throughout the US.

How then to carry forward the struggle?

First, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on Scranton teachers to join our ranks. Second, we call on Scranton teachers to build an independent Educators Rank-and-File Committee of their own in Scranton, completely independent of the AFT. For the strike to succeed, its conduct has to be taken out of the hands of the AFT.

Rank-and-file committees have been formed by different sections of the American and international working class in recent months. They have led opposition to rotten sell-out contracts promoted by the United Auto Workers at Mack, Volvo and Deere. And they have led the opposition to the reckless and unsafe reopening of schools across the US and internationally.

A rank-and-file committee, totally independent of the AFT, can organize a real fight. It answers only to its working-class members, not the corporate politicians. It can, therefore, seek to expand the strike to all school workers, linking the struggle to teachers and working class struggles everywhere, and actively campaigning for the support of parents and students. It can and must reject the lie that there is not enough money to pay teachers a decent wage and provide expanded and safe education to all students.

In solidarity with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee pledge our support to the fight in Scranton, and to help broaden and coordinate working class struggles in Pennsylvania and beyond.



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