

Scranton teachers' strike faces danger of isolation by the AFT

Our correspondents
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The strike of 800 Scranton, Pennsylvania public school teachers and paraprofessionals entered its fifth day on Tuesday. No new negotiations have been reported since Thursday.

Teachers are striking after four years without a contract, wage freezes, health care cost increases and devastating cuts to school curriculum. The Scranton School District, which has nearly 10,000 students, has refused minimal wage increases, even as inflation is locking teachers into de-facto pay cuts.

A current teacher, with 10 years of experience, told the WSWs that there have been no raises since 2017. Starting teachers in Scranton, she said, earn as little as \$37,000. The WSWs also recently spoke to a first-year paraprofessional whose salary is only \$20,000. These pay levels make Scranton educators among the lowest-paid educators in the region.

In a cruel and vindictive act, the district has even cut off health care to striking teachers and their dependents. A retired Scranton music teacher, James Buckley, with 30 years of experience, said that he knows of teachers with family members undergoing cancer treatment who have now lost their health insurance.

Teachers who have spoken with the WSWs expressed sharp anger at cuts the district has imposed on various programs, including music and school libraries. Children in Scranton, they say, are being robbed of access to basic elements of education, including the arts and culture.

If the district acts with impunity in its treatment of teachers and students, it is because it has taken the measure of the American Federation of Teachers and its local affiliate, the Scranton Federation of Teachers.

Six years ago, after the last Scranton teachers strike, the AFT sent teachers back to work with a rotten short-term contract, and then after it expired kept them at

work on the expired contract for four years. Scores of educators, demoralized by their treatment, have left the district.

The AFT intends to use the same playbook this time around—let angry teachers blow off steam, isolate them on the picket line, and then convince them whatever rotten deal is on offer is the best that can be won. Union officials will likely hide behind a Pennsylvania statute that requires students have at least 180 days of instruction before June 30, 2022. This would necessitate an end to the strike no later than November 30—immediately after the Thanksgiving holiday break.

The AFT has made no effort to broaden the struggle, even though workers throughout Pennsylvania, the country and the world are also fighting against wage stagnation, overwork and unsafe work conditions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is immense potential for broadening the struggle. Teachers in the neighboring city of Carbondale, Pennsylvania also authorized a strike on Monday. Carbondale teachers, who are in the National Education Association, have been without a contract for two years.

The AFT and the NEA function as arms of the Democratic Party, which, under the administration of Scranton-born Joe Biden, has dropped even the pretext of providing the funding desperately required by schools across the country. Biden's proposed 2022 budget would allocate \$765 billion to the military—seven times the \$107 billion he proposes for all levels of educational spending. The Federal Reserve is giving away virtually the same amount, \$105 billion, *every month* to the financial markets.

The AFT and NEA adamantly oppose any struggle that upsets their cozy relations with the Democratic Party and the capitalist interests it represents. The

teacher unions were in fact instrumental in pushing the unsafe reopening of schools this fall. AFT President Randi Weingarten, who takes home an annual salary of \$500,000, even visited Scranton in August as part of her homicidal “Back to School for All” tour.

Scranton packs as many as 35 students into classrooms, many of which have no air conditioning—or even functional windows. Predictably, the COVID-19 pandemic has been raging in Lackawanna County all autumn, with the schools, where students below the age of 12 are entirely unvaccinated, serving as the epicenter.

On Friday, a WSWs correspondent was joined at the picket lines by a member of the Mack Workers Rank-and-File Committee from Macungie, Pennsylvania. They distributed copies of a statement by the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, “The way forward for striking Scranton teachers.”

The autoworker spoke to teachers about the need to take the struggle out of the hands of the AFT. He warned them that the AFT will use the same methods to shut down their struggle as the United Auto Workers union did against striking New River Volvo workers this past summer in Virginia, and as the UAW is currently attempting to do against striking Deere workers in the Midwest.

Teachers warmly received the autoworker, and readily agreed with his argument that they need to broaden their struggle. However, picket captains from the AFT demanded that educators not speak to the WSWs and sought to break up the discussion.

Educators should reject this anti-democratic gag order from the AFT. Preventing teachers from speaking to the WSWs is part of the AFT’s efforts to isolate and ultimately sabotage the strike.

To fight the AFT-enforced isolation, Scranton teachers should join the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to carry forward their struggle and to link it up with teachers and workers everywhere. For more information, visit wsws.org/edsafety.



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