

Scranton teachers union seeks to divert strike with fruitless appeals to the Democrats

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The strike of 800 Scranton, Pennsylvania, public school teachers and paraprofessionals is nearing the end of its second week. The strike began on November 3 and has closed schools for 10,000 students.

In a move designed to divert striking Scranton teachers' anger and prevent them from expanding their struggle, the Scranton Federation of Teachers (SFT) organized a stunt protest outside the state capitol in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on Wednesday. The rally focused primarily on issuing hopeless appeals to Democratic Governor Tom Wolf and Republican lawmakers for additional school funding.

In an act of savage brutality and to force teachers back to work amid a raging pandemic, the Scranton School Board recently eliminated health care benefits for striking teachers and their families. School board and union officials met Friday in the first set of negotiations in over a week.

Hundreds of teachers took buses and carpooled over 120 miles to Harrisburg on Wednesday, where they listened to speakers and lobbied lawmakers. Chief among those present was Pennsylvania Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman, who made a vague promise to support teachers that will amount to nothing.

The day prior to the rally, Fetterman traveled to Scranton where he met with teachers on their picket line and told them, "You just want what you deserve, what's fair and what's equitable." Referring to the fact that teachers have gone five years without a raise, he told the strikers, "It's an abomination."

Fetterman has made his political career posing as a friend of the working class and poor. He began as mayor of Braddock, Pennsylvania, an impoverished steel town in the southwestern region of the state just outside Pittsburgh. As mayor, he oversaw the shutdown of the only hospital in the area and the loss of 900 jobs.

For his label as a progressive and "man of the people," Fetterman has been courted by the pseudo-left. During the 2020 elections, he shared platforms and held campaign rallies with Bernie Sanders.

As lieutenant governor, Fetterman's main priority has not

been funding for education or even the response to the pandemic. In 2019, he went along with the placing of the Scranton School District under a Department of Education "recovery plan," the very legislation that Scranton teachers deeply oppose. Under the plan, the school district has cut art, music, and before and after school programs. In addition, teachers are not allowed any pay raises unless the money comes from cuts elsewhere in their contract, including cuts to their health benefits.

Cuts in the district have been ongoing, most recently shutting down libraries and further cuts to music programs. The recovery plan has done nothing to benefit teachers or students. Teachers have been working without a contract for four years and have not had a pay raise in five years. Starting salaries are just \$37,000 a year for teachers and \$20,000 for paraprofessionals, well below the state average of \$51,000. In the past two years alone, due to the dire conditions in the district, SSD has lost over 100 educators.

Pennsylvania also has one of the most unequal formulas for the funding of public education in the country, which has been the subject of repeated lawsuits over the past three decades. Part of the purpose of Wednesday's demonstration in Harrisburg was to draw attention to a current lawsuit regarding public education funding in the state.

Made up of 500 separate local school districts, funding for education in Pennsylvania relies primarily on local property taxes, meaning that school districts in wealthier areas have much more money than districts in low-income communities. State funding is also based on attendance, with low-income communities having chronically lower attendance.

As a result, total per student funding can be twice as high in wealthier districts as poorer districts. Furthermore, school districts serving working-class and low-income communities face higher costs of providing additional services to their students. The state education funding does little or nothing to overcome this inherent inequality.

Pennsylvania's regressive funding formula has been kept in place for decades by both Republican and Democratic

governors. In 2014, Tom Wolf defeated former Republican Governor Tom Corbett, primarily as a massive backlash against the deep cuts to education made under the Corbett administration.

When taking office in 2015, Wolf restored state funding for education to the levels that existed prior to Corbett's cuts, but he never restored the funds that districts lost over those four years, let alone make up for inflation or the inequality in the state funding formula. While Wolf claims to be for the implementation of a more equal state funding formula, it has not been implemented in his almost seven years as governor.

The SFT, part of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the second largest national teachers union in the US with 1.7 million members, is seeking to prevent the strike in Scranton from spreading to other school districts throughout the state and the country.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the AFT has not called a single strike against the horrific and deadly conditions that teachers and educators have had to work under. Instead, the union has worked systematically alongside the National Education Association (NEA) to suppress and isolate the efforts of teachers to oppose the homicidal reopening of schools.

AFT President Randi Weingarten—a sitting member of the Democratic National Committee—pockets a salary of \$500,000 per year. She has led the campaign to reopen schools and keep them open, despite the looming winter surge and the devastating fall surge which resulted in millions of child COVID-19 cases, hundreds of child deaths and the further community spread of the virus.

In December 2020, Cleveland Heights Teachers Union (CHTU) abruptly called off a limited teachers strike just hours after pickets had formed. Following Biden's inauguration at the beginning of 2021, Weingarten and the AFT spearheaded the reopening of schools in Democrat-led cities before teachers were fully vaccinated, despite mass opposition among rank-and-file teachers. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and many more pressured teachers to accept entirely unsafe reopening plans which also greatly increased teacher workload.

Last week, the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed by educators independently of the unions to wage a struggle against school reopenings during the pandemic, issued a statement in full support of the Scranton strikers. The committee issued a warning to striking Scranton teachers that the AFT's "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."

Now the SFT and AFT are seeking to divert the strike into pressuring politicians who have been cutting funding and will tell teachers that they must accept a rotten contract until the funding formula is fixed.

The critical task facing Scranton teachers is to build an educators rank-and-file committee of their own, completely independent of the AFT. For the strike to succeed, its conduct must be taken out of the hands of the AFT.

Such a committee would develop the demands of the educators themselves and be based not on what the district and state officials say they can afford but on what educators need to both live and provide a quality education for their students. This would include:

- Increase in starting salaries to \$60,000 a year and a corresponding increase for all steps
- Full health benefits paid for by the district
- Restoration of art, music, libraries and all programs that have been cut
- Hiring of enough staff to reduce class size to no more than 20 students per class

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 SFT and 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 with teachers and workers 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.

For more information about joining this fight, email the Pennsylvania Rank-and-File Committee at paedrankandfile@gmail.com, text (412) 336-8245 or visit <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/pages/educators-rank-and-file-committee.html>.



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