

Teachers prepare to strike in Pleasant Valley, Pennsylvania

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A strike of 350 educators is scheduled to begin February 28 in the Pleasant Valley School District (PVSD). The contract expired on June 30, 2021, but the Pleasant Valley Education Association (PVEA) and district agreed to extend it until a Tentative Agreement (TA) could be reached.

Teachers are fighting for better working conditions as the COVID-19 pandemic death toll reaches 1 million in the US. The Omicron surge has wreaked havoc on educators, students and their families, leading to higher pay on health care and prescription drug coverage.

The district is proposing a pay freeze in the first year of the contract, with additional raises below the current rate of inflation of 7.5 percent in the last three years of the contract, while shifting more costs onto teachers for health care and prescriptions.

The district claims that a \$5 million dollar budget deficit justifies this substantial attack on the living standards of PVSD teachers and is outrageously placing the blame for high taxes and a potential tax increase to 4.7 percent on teachers' wages and benefits.

The PVSD and PVEA have met four times since January 2021. The most recent meeting on February 11 lasted for seven hours without an agreement. The next scheduled meeting will happen on February 25, barring any extension or TA. A statement on the PVSD's website states that any contract "must be fair in that it balances the needs of the teachers along with the fiscal impact any settlement may have on our taxpayers."

Over a year's worth of back-and-forth negotiating has made it clear that nothing other than a sellout agreement will come through the PVEA, with union president Drew Dymond stating that he will carry the negotiations into the weekend to avert a strike at all costs. If so, teachers would only have at most a couple of days to study and discuss the proposal before a vote

is taken. This excludes the possibility that the PVEA may call on teachers to return to the classroom without a vote.

In November, after educators had voted overwhelmingly for strike authorization, the PVEA instead staged an impotent protest during a school board meeting to dissipate the widespread will to strike among rank-and-file members.

The district seeks to blame a possible strike on educators. On February 16, the board of education issued a statement declaring, "A strike will accomplish little in terms of achieving lasting labor peace, and instead will be terribly disruptive to a community looking to heal from the pandemic related issues of the past two years."

In other words, while educators have risked their lives teaching through the ongoing pandemic, they should agree to a PVEA-backed sellout contract for the sake of private interests and that the right to strike will be met with severe repercussions.

Pleasant Valley is a mid-size, rural area in Monroe County, Pennsylvania. It is also the location of a number of important educators' struggles in recent times. Last November, 800 teachers in Scranton, to the north of Pleasant Valley, struck after going years without a new contract or wage increases. In 2018, 600 teachers in neighboring East Stroudsburg went on strike against a contract proposal that offered a meager 11 percent pay raise over five years.

For his part, Dymond is bending over backwards to come to an agreement in line with the wishes of the district before the union has to reluctantly call a strike, stating earlier this month, "we are looking at the budget numbers and have been trying to work within the confines of the district's proposal on money and health care." He added, "we've been real creative in trying to

take into account the district's financial position.”

Some of these “creative” measures include schemes to push teachers out the door by “incentivizing” them to take an early retirement. This will help the district reduce costs and minimize future furloughs, which already happened to paraprofessionals in 2020.

Earlier this month, the PVEA and district signed a memorandum of understanding under which at least 25 teachers would need to retire for it to take effect. Severance payments would be 35 percent of base salary, paid in two payments into an enhanced tax-sheltered annuity account.

Teachers would also have to permanently retire from teaching and file into the Pennsylvania School Employee Retirement System. Should they become employed again in a non-substitute position in any other school district, they will not receive the severance pay and must pay back any installments that were received.

Rank-and-file educators must form their own strike committee in opposition to both the district and the PVEA, who are working to unload the budget deficits on teachers who have risked their own lives teaching children during the ongoing pandemic. The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, formed in 2020 to oppose the unsafe reopening of schools, will provide critical assistance to teachers in Pleasant Valley.

The struggle against the district and the PVEA must be broadened to include all sections of school workers, parents and students in Pennsylvania and other parts of the country, as well as workers in different industries who are similarly fighting for safe working conditions, better pay and health care and a secure retirement.

Over the past several decades, the capitalist class has allowed public schools to rot and crumble while enriching themselves at the expense of society. At the same time, funding for the military has been consistently expanded. During the pandemic, US billionaires have increased their wealth from \$8 trillion to over \$13 trillion while the working class has been increasingly impoverished.

This week, dozens of teachers, students, and parents from Paul Robeson High School in Philadelphia protested decaying school buildings, contaminated drinking water and poor ventilation and air conditioning systems. Philadelphia was previously the

site of a teacher sickout and protests after a beloved high schooler at Olney Charter School tragically died of COVID-19.

We encourage Pleasant Valley educators, parents, students and community members to attend the next meeting of the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Sign up here or call/text 717-739-9517 to get involved.



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