

Washington D.C. teachers, school system facing impasse three years after contract expiration

Pete Salmon, Nick Barrickman
15 July 2022

The Washington Teachers Union (WTU) and the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) system have been unable to come to an agreement on the terms of a new contract, leaving teachers to continue to work without a contract after the previous contract lapsed three years ago.

Roughly 4,000 teachers in Washington D.C.'s public school system have been without a contract since 2019. The contract sets conditions on teacher development training, base compensation, overtime pay and class-size limits for each grade. Teachers stopped receiving base pay increases after the contract expiration, although teachers continued to receive raises based on tenure.

According to an article published July 8 in the *Washington Post*, "[t]he two parties have had standing meetings every week for the past three years to negotiate the contract," but have been unable to come to an agreement.

The article reflects the attitudes of the Washington D.C. business and political establishment that are concerned about the economic consequences if teachers, who face stagnant and declining living conditions amid record-breaking inflation, were to aggressively assert their social interests.

Last month, teachers rallied in the John A. Wilson building, D.C.'s legislature, demanding pay raises to keep up with the ever-growing costs of living, brought about by inflation, and smaller class sizes. This was not the first time D.C. teachers protested for better pay; in January, substitute teachers gathered outside the building over meager pay for "non-long term and non-retiree substitute teachers," according to WJLA. This comes out to essentially \$15 an hour, 60 percent less

than those of retired teachers.

The *Post* article states, "The school system is currently negotiating contracts with three different labor groups, with all the raises and pay changes coming from the same pool of money." In addition to teachers, the school system previously settled negotiations with the principals' union, the Council of School Officers.

Although DCPS chancellor Lewis D. Ferebee cited pay as a sticking point with teachers, he was silent on the specifics of negotiations. "I don't think we are that far apart, and I am still hopeful that we get there," he stated to the *Post*.

WTU president Jacqueline Pogue Lyons, for her part, downplayed wages as a sticking point in the negotiations. Lyons asserted "the remaining disagreements are not about money but rather how much time teachers are guaranteed to have to plan lessons and grade assignments each week," said the *Post*.

Currently, teachers are allotted 225 minutes weekly to plan classes. Some of this planning time has been eaten up by conditions of the pandemic, in which teachers have "to make up for what was lost during the pandemic," said Lyons.

Lyons' downplaying of compensation is significant. The median pay for a public school teacher, according to salary.com, is \$61,215, and as inflation and high gas and food prices continue to wreak havoc on workers' incomes, the purchasing power is rapidly dwindling.

According to the career-finding website Zippia, "The cost of living in Washington is 51% higher than the national average. The national average salary is \$56,310, so a good salary in Washington is anything

over \$85,028 by this measure.”

What DCPS and the WTU do agree upon, however, is the need to suppress the class struggle however it may express itself in the District of Columbia.

Clear proof of this was the collaboration of the WTU and DCPS to reopen schools in-person in 2021. Despite COVID-19 continuing to spread and intensify, the WTU and DCPS hatched a scheme to reopen public schools during the spring.

The decision was unscientific, based upon the now-entirely discredited notion that COVID-19 doesn’t spread in schools. This deal was strongly opposed by D.C. teachers, who insisted on the option for remote learning.

The *Post* is compelled to make note of the WTU’s decision to sell out its members’ health and safety. It writes, “the labor contract deliberations overlapped with months of publicly contentious negotiations in 2020 and 2021 over how to safely reopen school buildings during the pandemic, which the two groups ultimately reached agreements on.”

The political establishment’s unease over the prospect of a teachers’ walkout boiled over in February 2021. Then, Democratic D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser filed an emergency motion, enjoining the union from taking part in any strikes and effectively blocking attempts by teachers to further stop reopening plans.

This plan was done in an effort to head off a potential walkout by D.C. teachers in solidarity with their fellow teachers in Philadelphia and Chicago. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, “The WTU, like the [Chicago Teachers’ Union] in Chicago, is trying to wear down massive teacher opposition to school reopenings and will isolate any strike that does break out.”

In May, the *Post* reported that “4,698 D.C. Public Schools students had been identified as a close contact of someone who tested positive within the last 10 days.” Although COVID numbers in D.C. and across the Mid-Atlantic area have tailed off from their peaks in late May, the pandemic continues to be a serious threat and as long as teachers, students and staff are forced back into a “normal” routine, their lives continue to remain at risk.

Nationally, it was reported in late April that three-quarters of all children, along with 50 percent of adults, had tested positive for COVID-19, refuting in cruel

fashion the lie that it doesn’t spread in classrooms. At the same time, the WSWS noted a significant lapse in the District’s reporting of COVID-19 numbers, which lasted two weeks and has yet to be explained.

Many teachers, overworked and underpaid, especially in the midst of the pandemic, have quit their jobs in response to the drive by the ruling class and their accomplices in the trade union bureaucracy to herd children into schools in order to force workers back to work. As more intense pressures are placed these teachers, as noted in a WSWS article from late May of this year, burnout and stress become greater issues.

Teachers and school staff must draw the lessons from these developments. The WTU will not assist them in the wake of runaway inflation. Teachers must form rank-and-file committees and take the fight into their own hands.

These committees must link up with other sections of workers coming into struggles across the area, foremost with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority workers who facing cuts to services and jobs due attempts by authorities to resolve a budget crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has vastly intensified the assault on the conditions of life of the working class. However, the stopping of the pandemic is not primarily a medical question but requires a political struggle by the working class against the capitalist system, which subordinates health like all other social questions to the drive for private profit.

Workers must mobilize around the country and all over the world to fight for the elimination and ultimate eradication of COVID-19. This is only possible on the basis of a mass movement of the world’s working class, fighting for a socialist society based on providing for the good of all, not for the profits of an elite few.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact