

Kent School District teachers near Seattle strike for safe staffing, expanded support services and higher pay

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28 August 2022

We encourage all educators, staff, parents and students at the Kent School District and nearby districts to contact us and share your thoughts about this strike.

Teachers, counselors, nurses and therapists working for Kent School District in the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue metropolitan area went on strike Thursday, delaying the start of the school year, after 94 percent voted to walk out. Classes have as a result been canceled all week for the district's 25,000 students.

The workers are demanding better pay, proper staffing and expanded health services in the district. They join thousands of other educators who have gone on strike this year in Minnesota, Ohio, California, Illinois and elsewhere over the same fundamental issues. The universal character of the conditions confronting public education emphasizes the need to form a network of independent rank-and-file committees, through which educators can build a powerful united movement to assert their demands.

"I support the strike because our wages are below surrounding districts and we have minimal support," one of the striking teachers told to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "My classroom is in overload and I have an open para[-educator] position, therefore I will be doing more work with less breaks in order to make sure my students have the support they need."

The city of Kent is home to industrial parks with Amazon warehouses, Boeing industrial buildings and manufacturing factories. Having grown over the last few years due to the influx of workers, it is now one of the largest districts in the metro area, with a high percentage of poor, working class and minority students.

The district reports that 57 percent of the students are from low-income families. About one-quarter of students at Kent-Meridian High School are still learning English as a non-native language. The conditions facing these students means there is a greater need for social support services, such as mental health care and special education supports, but the

schools lack the resources to provide them.

Kent-Meridian has only one counselor for every 500 students, well below the recommendation by the American School Counselor Association of one counselor for every 250 students. Without enough full-time certified teachers, public schools increasingly rely upon the support of lower-paid uncertified workers like paraeducators and substitutes. A second or even third staff member in a classroom is often necessary to make sure students get individualized support they require.

However, paraeducators do not get the training they need to be safe and provide adequate help, especially in higher-needs special education classrooms. "Some teachers don't know how to handle kids who hit or bite or have other behavioral issues," said Kristen Bobo to the *Seattle Times*.

Students are also suffering from high turnover as a result of poor pay. Many teachers who are tired of poor pay, high costs of living and extreme workloads move to better-paid positions further south, giving students a very disjointed school year.

Kent School District has received a one-time sum of \$63.5 million in federal funds as part of the CARES Act, but the district refuses to allocate any of these funds for either higher wages or more positions. The district has stayed firm on its offer of a maximum 5.5 percent pay increase, well below the current 8.5 percent inflation rate and an effective 3 percent pay cut.

Parents and teachers expressed further outrage on social media, opposing the right-wing attempts to pit supposedly "greedy" teachers against parents and students. One commenter described the grotesque income inequality between administration and school staff, as well as blatant nepotism. "The new, inexperienced Superintendent... got a 27 percent raise." The commenter continued, "He makes nearly three times what [Washington governor Jay] Inslee earns, while having little to no experience. He created a bunch of new positions to plop all his friends in and got

them raises too. This is why the union voted no confidence against the board and the superintendent, in addition to the proposal to strike.”

Another made clear that the district “told the teacher’s union they would not begin bargaining with them until July when the union was ready to give proposals starting in May,” dragging out the process and thus deterring new teachers from applying to uncertain positions. Other parents came to the defense of teachers, affirming that, “If Kent students aren’t in school ... it’s not the teachers who are to blame.”

For its part, the Kent Education Association (KEA) bears responsibility for isolating staff from the broad mass of educators and workers throughout the region, including 8,000 staff members in the Seattle Public Schools district who are still without a contract with the school year starting on September 7. Over the summer, the KEA did nothing to mobilize a struggle in advance of the contract negotiations, issuing very few updates and no specific demands.

The last strike launched by teachers at Kent Public Schools lasted sixteen days and took place in 2009. Not only did the district not acquiesce to teacher’s demand for manageable student-to-teacher classroom ratios, a King County Superior Court Judge declared the short strike illegal and imposed \$200 a day fines on teachers who refused to leave the picket lines. The Kent Education Association kept the struggle locally isolated, and thus teachers were unable to withstand the pressure of the court’s fines and loss of wages, resulting in a demoralizing return to work.

The KEA “backed down” in 2009 and will take its marching orders from the district and “back down” again in 2022. The statements of the KEA leadership make clear that they are seeking to end the strike as quickly as possible and have offered no strategy for teachers to win their necessary demands. If the strike is left in the hands of the KEA, then the strike will go on for only as long as the district and courts allow.

Furthermore, the union has dropped questions of health and safety amid the continued high rates of COVID-19 transmission and emerging monkeypox outbreaks, fully accepting conditions of mass infection and death for yet another school year. After two and a half years of the pandemic, little has been done to make school buildings safer through the installation of ventilation systems.

Washington state no longer requires masks in schools and has dropped testing and quarantine guidelines for exposed students. These issues are not mentioned in any materials regarding the ongoing negotiations. As thousands of American teachers have died or developed Long COVID, the teachers unions have remained complicit and silent, herding teachers and students back into classrooms

regardless of how many are infected.

Despite the *ad nauseum* claims of politicians and school boards, there are plenty of financial resources to fully fund public education and social services. Washington state is home to 16 of the richest billionaires in the world, including executives of Amazon, Microsoft, Facebook and Boeing, all of whom massively increased their wealth during the pandemic, which has now killed over 1 million in the US alone.

Resolving the crisis of public education requires a mass working class movement to demand that money be redirected from the coffers of the rich and toward meeting social needs. This is why it is necessary to develop a network of independent educators’ rank-and-file committee, outside the control of the union apparatus.

In building a rank-and-file committee, Kent teachers and staff can articulate their demands for the specific staffing ratios, classroom sizes and wage increases that are necessary. Furthermore, by taking democratic control over the direction of the strike, staff can win the active support of educators, working class families and students throughout Washington state and across the country, strengthening their ability to resist state repression and reject sellout tentative agreements.

Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker running as a candidate for United Auto Workers president, visited the picket lines of 4,000 striking teachers in Columbus, Ohio. He called on all UAW workers, along with all teachers and other sections of the working class, to rally in support of the striking Columbus teachers. “In their defense of public education,” Lehman said, “they are fighting for the interests of all workers, and they can’t win this fight alone.” These words are just as true for the striking educators in Kent.

The **World Socialist Web Site** will do everything possible to help connect teachers with one another, and with the working class both in the US and internationally. If you would like to share your experiences or learn more about how to get involved, contact us today.



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