

Strike of 6,000 Seattle Public Schools teachers looms as walkout by 2,000 teachers in neighboring Kent School District enters second week

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Are you a teacher, parent or student in Seattle Public Schools, Kent School District, or a neighboring district? The World Socialist Web Site wants to hear from you. Fill out the form at the bottom of this article to tell us what you're fighting for. All comments will be kept anonymous.

Nearly 6,000 educators in Seattle Public Schools will be voting Monday to strike as schools are set to reopen the following day, Tuesday September 8. Like so many teachers across the US, Seattle teachers have endured over two years of a pandemic, facing constant risk of infection and death, as well as crippling workloads and stress, which has compounded an ongoing staffing crisis.

Last year, staffing shortages due to COVID-19 infections led to canceling school days district-wide due to insufficient safe staffing levels. Now with schools scheduled to reopen Tuesday, none of these issues have been resolved.

The current contract between the district and Seattle Education Association (SEA) expired on Wednesday, August 31, 2022. Teachers are calling for much needed improvements, including more supports for student needs, sustainable workloads, and increased pay. Teachers have been most vocal about the district's attempt to significantly cut staffing ratios for special education and multilingual students, who require specialized attention to succeed.

The looming strike of Seattle teachers takes place as nearly 2,000 teachers in the neighboring Kent Public School District enter the second week of their indefinite strike. Kent teachers are currently fighting over similar issues, including increased mental health options for students, smaller class sizes and caseloads for teachers. The district has proposed a measly 6.3 percent raise over the course of the year and a one-time \$1,000 bonus. Such an "increase" is in reality a real cut to wages as inflation is currently 8.5 percent. No proposals from the district nor the Kent Education Association (KEA) include major funds needed for Kent

teachers and students.

Seattle teachers are also demanding that COVID-19 safety protocols be addressed by the district. However, the district's latest proposal includes no mention of specific safety protocols, outside of what the Department of Health (DOH) recommends, which is vague and bare bones. For their part, the SEA is only calling for the current status quo on COVID-19 safety measures.

At the insistence of the Biden Administration and with full support of the National Education Association (NEA)—the parent organization of the SEA—and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Seattle Public Schools, like virtually every other district nationwide, has dropped all measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Mitigation measures, such as contact tracing, quarantining and temporary school closures to reduce transmission, have been mostly relinquished. It is in the economic interests of the Biden administration and the AFT to keep kids in school, without safety measures in place, so that their parents can go to work, to continue producing profits for the financial elite, regardless of risk to workers' lives and their families.

Already as schools are opening throughout the country, new surges of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths are being reported. Vaccination rates amongst children are remarkably low. The latest numbers from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) show only 30.3 percent of kids ages 5-11 and 60.2 percent of kids ages 12-17 are fully vaccinated. Additionally, monkeypox is on the rise in America with nearly 20,000 cases nationwide, and widespread prevention through vaccination isn't yet available to children. Such will no doubt result in major spread of both COVID-19 and monkeypox in the coming weeks and months.

The teacher unions have adhered to Biden's "forever COVID" policy by demanding that schools stay open

regardless of community transmission rates. Both the Biden administration and the unions have worked to weaken the opposition of educators and students. Walkouts, sickouts and strikes by students and teachers that have broken out throughout the pandemic have been suppressed and shut down by the union bureaucracy in order to avoid struggles from breaking out of the grip of the union and to ensure educators and students were forced back into unsafe schools.

The White House Townhall held last Thursday with national teacher union presidents Becky Pringle (NEA) and Randi Weingarten (AFT) showcased the deep ties between the union and the capitalist state. The entire event sought to minimize the mass opposition of parents and workers to a third academic year of COVID-19 spread in schools as union and federal officials continued to congratulate one another for working together to keep schools open.

Teachers in Seattle and Kent must take lessons from the major teacher strikes at the beginning of the year in Minneapolis and Sacramento, which in each case were actively isolated and suppressed by the national and local teacher unions who forced through sellout agreements meeting none of the demands of striking teachers. Most recently in Columbus, Ohio, the NEA-affiliated Columbus Education Association (CEA) cut short the powerful strike of 4,000 teachers, with pressure from the Biden administration. The resulting contract met none of the teachers' demands for wage increases, better staffing, better ventilation. Educators have not been given any accounting of what happened to the \$400 million the district accrued from federal COVID-19 relief money.

Teachers in Seattle and Kent must not let their struggles be isolated and betrayed! The sellout of the Columbus strike is another illustration of why teachers and workers in all industries need to take power into their own hands. Teachers in Kent and Seattle must unite their struggle and develop rank-and-file strike committees to harness their collective strength and in opposition to the pressure of the corporatist unions, the Democratic Party and their allies in the pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America and Khsama Sawant's Socialist Alternative.

Across the world, a mass upsurge of the working class is emerging against social inequality, the rising cost of living and the squandering of billions for the US/NATO proxy war against Russia. Biden can find endless resources for reckless wars while saying there is no money for improved wages, COVID protection or to end school cuts.

Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker running for president for United Auto Workers (UAW), recently issued a statement to support striking Ohio teachers. "In their defense of public education," he 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 Washington State.

Teachers from across the US are in support of the struggle of Washington teachers. Juanita Garcia recently sent in a statement to the *World Socialist Web Site* in support of Seattle and Kent teachers. Juanita, a former early childhood teacher in Los Angeles Unified School District, said, "I want to say to the teachers striking at the Kent Schools and the Seattle teachers: Keep your spirits up. I know how hard it is being a teacher under the conditions you are fighting.

"Never, never rely on your union. Most of the time, these people are only trying to please other union bureaucrats, getting their fat checks and living high. They do nothing for the teachers. And I'm saying this from the bottom of my heart. I really feel this way.

"We are not just teachers. We are also nurses and counselors to our students and often their parents. Many times our classrooms are the only safe places for them.

"Teachers face the worst mistreatment of all professions. We get our degrees and then daily take care of and teach children under worsening conditions. Sometimes we are the ones buying food and clothing for our students and their families.

"We've been so mistreated. I know. I'm one of them. I'm suffering from all the things the union never fought for. All they do is collect dues and travel to conferences. That's not what the unions are supposed to do. We need real organizations, real leaders.

"Sisters and brothers, these unions just get into positions and forget about us. It's time to wake up! We need to build these rank-and-file committees. We, the working people, have to unite, regardless of race, color or religion."



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