“I can’t afford to live in the district I work in”: 6,000 Seattle teachers and support staff strike, cancelling first day of school

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Six thousand teachers and support staff in Seattle, Washington began a strike this morning, cancelling the first day of classes for 50,000 students in the state’s largest school district. The walkout followed a 95 percent vote by teachers, paraprofessionals and office workers to authorize strike action.

The Seattle Education Association (SEA) did everything it could to reach a last-minute deal but was unable to prevent a strike. Union officials have pledged to continue talks to reach an agreement to bring teachers “back to the classrooms as fast as possible.” The union also dropped its initial opposition to the district’s demands for the intervention of a mediator.

Teachers are demanding sharp increases in salaries and benefits to keep up with inflation, reduced class sizes, more school resources and better COVID-19 protections for staff and students alike. Like teachers across the country, Seattle Public School teachers are working under conditions of severe understaffing, low pay in the face of surging living expenses, the near-total absence of COVID-19 protection measures, and lack of mental health resources for students.

The highlight of the current proposal between the district and the union is a wage increase of 5.5 percent, well below the current inflation rate of 8.5 percent. There is also no concrete cap on class sizes in general, merely a vague proposal by the SEA that “caps class sizes for secondary non-core classes to bring parity with core classes.”

A SPS math teacher told the WSWS, “We’re 90 students over what we are budgeted for at my school. Today alone we got seven new students, and I just spoke to a teacher at a middle school and they’re over enrolled as well. So we’re understaffed, we don’t have the resources we need to support every student. And SPS makes enrollment decisions too late, like October, when it’s too late to hire somebody.

“We are expecting 35 students per class,” she continued, “and that’s way too large for us to be able to meet all their learning needs. We have a lot of neurodivergent students; I think 45 percent of our students have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). We don’t have the staff that we need to really support everybody that needs the support.

“I started in 2018, when I moved back to Seattle. I was displaced in October, moved from one school to another school, even though I was given a special contract where I was supposed to be able to choose where I wanted to go. I had built relationships with students that had already been established. And then I had to go to a whole new school and start over, which is just not conducive to what students need.

“I can’t afford to live in the district I work in. My kid will not be able to go to the schools that I teach at.

“Regarding COVID safety, I think my biggest complaint was that they ended the mask mandate midway through the year. I’m pregnant and I got COVID from an unmasked student and it totally changes the rest of the pregnancy.”

The strike vote is the latest expression of opposition by educators against increasingly intolerable conditions in classrooms, conditions that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Just last week, 2,000 educators in nearby Kent, Washington walked out over the same essential issues, including mental health counseling for students and smaller class sizes.

In Columbus, Ohio, 4,500 teachers, librarians, nurses and aides went on strike last month to demand higher

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wages, smaller class sizes, better ventilation in school buildings and other COVID-19 protections. The Columbus Education Association, working with a federal mediator, shut down the strike after announcing a "conceptual agreement" and then rammed through a deal that ignores the strikers' main demands.

The Seattle strike is a direct challenge to the efforts by the National Education Association (NEA), the parent organization of the Seattle Education Association, and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to suppress opposition among teachers. Last week, NEA President Becky Pringle and AFT President Randi Weingarten took part in an online town hall sponsored by the Biden Administration, which had the sole goal of making clear that schools would remain in-person, regardless of the level of sickness and death caused by the coronavirus. Both union presidents praised the Biden administration's handling of the pandemic, ignoring the loss of more than 600,000 lives since Biden took office.

The walkout its currently the largest teachers strike in the US and has the potential of rallying hundreds of thousands of educators across the country, including 35,000 in Los Angeles still working without a new contract, in a counter-offensive against the unsafe reopening of the schools, a new round of school budget cuts, and intolerable working conditions.

To unite with teachers in Kent and across the country, and broader sections of workers like dockworkers, railroad workers, nurses and others, Seattle teachers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. This means building rank-and-file strike committees to issue specific demands for wages, class sizes and health and safety, and to mobilize the broad support teachers enjoy among students, parents and the city's working class population.

To sustain such a fight, educators must demand that the NEA provide full strike pay to cover lost income, thus sending a signal to district officials that teachers are prepared to wage a real fight.

Sharp lessons must be drawn from the sabotage of previous struggles by the SEA. In 2018, the SEA helped state union officials shut down a growing strike wave of teachers across Washington state by agreeing to a deal and sending teachers back for first week of school before they even had a chance to vote on it. The sellout deal denied health care to substitute teachers, maintained high student-to-teacher, student-to-counselor and student-to-nurse ratios and kept office staff and paraeducators on poverty-level wages.

SEA officials also helped city and state Democrats reopen schools last year, falsely claimed it was possible to open "safely" so long as "mitigation measures" were in place. At the same time, social distancing and ventilation measures were dropped, as were widespread testing and contact tracing.

When Cleveland High School principal Catherine Brown attempted to alert teachers and families of a major change made to contact tracing procedures in the school, the SEA said nothing when the district sought to remove her from her position.

To prevent a similar sellout, Seattle educators should join the growing national and international network of rank-and-file committee to launch a common fight in Seattle, Kent, Tacoma and across the state and beyond.

The Biden administration has found endless resources for its reckless proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and to prop up the stock market even as the vast majority of schools lack sufficient ventilation, and districts across the country predict severe budget shortfalls after one-time federal funding runs out. The development of a powerful strike movement by educators must be combined with a political struggle against both big business parties and the fight for a vast redistribution of society's resources to provide high-quality public education for all.

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