

Seattle teachers join expanding strike wave of US workers

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The surge in living costs, long working hours and other abusive conditions are driving more American workers to strike. On Wednesday, 6,000 teachers and support staff in the Seattle Public Schools walked out, joining ongoing strikes by thousands of workers in education, health care, agricultural equipment and other sectors of the economy.

“I can’t afford to live in the district I work in,” a Seattle teacher told the WSWWS after teachers voted by 95 percent to strike. “We’re 90 students over what we are budgeted for at my school. ... We’re understaffed, [and] we don’t have the resources we need to support every student.”

Like educators across the US and internationally, Seattle teachers want significant pay increases, reduced class sizes and better COVID-19 protections for themselves and their students. Although the state of Washington is home to 16 billionaires, including Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates, class sizes are among the highest in the nation. The state ranks 36th in student spending and 42nd in inflation-adjusted teacher salaries.

Inflation remains at 8.5 percent nationally, according to the latest figures from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, with energy costs up 33 percent and food costs rising 10.2 percent over the last year. On top of that, Seattle is one of the most expensive cities in the country. A two-bedroom apartment in the city rents for \$1,920, compared to the national average of \$1,278. Median home costs are \$891,000 in Seattle, compared to \$291,700 nationally.

The Seattle Education Association (SEA) did everything to avoid a strike and has pledged to work with district officials and a mediator to reach a deal to return “teachers to their classrooms as soon as possible.” The union’s proposal for a paltry 5.5 percent raise has been rejected by the Democratic Party-controlled school district. Officials have also refused to cap class sizes and are demanding staffing reductions for special education, multilingual education and other programs.

Fearing the spread of strikes in the Seattle metropolitan area and beyond, the National Education Association abruptly shut down the eight-day strike by 2,000 teachers in neighboring Kent on Wednesday morning. The Kent Education Association rushed a vote on a tentative agreement Wednesday night to get teachers back by today.

There have already been 10 major teacher strikes this year,

including at public schools in Minneapolis, Sacramento and Oakland. The NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have been working desperately to prevent or shut down strikes as quickly as possible in order to block any disruption to the reopening of schools despite the ongoing pandemic that has already killed at least 6,000 active and retired teachers.

Last month, the local NEA affiliate in Columbus, Ohio, shut down a three-day strike by 4,500 teachers demanding improved ventilation and COVID-19 protections after reaching a “conceptual agreement” brokered by a federal mediator which ignored teachers’ demands.

Despite the best efforts of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, there has been a significant increase in strike activity over the last several weeks.

• **On Wednesday, 500 faculty members at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in Ypsilanti, Michigan,** walked out to oppose the administration’s insistence that they accept wage increases averaging 3 percent over five years, which would be more than eaten up by inflation and increased medical premiums and other out-of-pocket costs. The educators, who are members of the American Association of University Professors, voted by 91 percent to strike.

• **In Pennsylvania, 700 nursing home workers** began a strike on September 3 at 14 facilities owned by Comprehensive Healthcare and Priority Healthcare. The licensed practical nurses (LPNs), certified nursing assistants (CNAs), support and dietary staff are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). They are demanding improved wages, increased staffing and better COVID-19 protections. No new negotiations have been scheduled, and the strike will expand to two more nursing homes—The Meadows at Gettysburg and The Meadows at West Shore—on September 9.

• **On September 12, 15,000 nurses across the state of Minnesota** are scheduled to begin a three-day strike against unsafe staffing ratios and wage proposals of 3-5 percent annually. The hospital monopolies received millions of dollars in federal COVID-19 relief money and are highly profitable. The decision to call the limited action came as anger grew against the Minnesota Nursing Association’s decision to keep nurses on the job months after the expiration of their contract and an overwhelmingly strike authorization vote.

• **Another 2,600 nurses at the University of Wisconsin (UW) Health in Madison are set to strike September 13-16** over understaffing, poor working conditions and union recognition. Hospital management has used the anti-labor laws enacted by former Republican Governor Scott Walker to obstruct the years-long unionization campaign at the hospital and prohibit any bargaining over benefits and working conditions. The Service Employees Health Care Wisconsin (part of the SEIU) says a majority of workers signed cards to join the union last year, but hospital management has refused to negotiate and has threatened workers for union activity.

• **In Northern California, 2,000 Kaiser Permanente mental health care workers** have been on strike since August 14 over wages, understaffing and massive wait times for patients. The strike includes psychologists, therapists, chemical dependency counselors and social workers, who are members of the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW). The strike involves Kaiser facilities in San Francisco, Fresno, Sacramento, San Jose and other cities.

• **Over 1,000 manufacturing workers at CNH Industrial in Wisconsin and Iowa** remain on strike after more than four months. Their struggle is being isolated by the United Auto Workers, which fears it could trigger a wider movement of autoworkers against years of pro-company contracts signed by the corrupt UAW apparatus.

With a fall surge of COVID-19 approaching and none of the issues facing health care workers resolved, the unions are seeking to block a new wave of nurses strikes. This includes 22,000 Kaiser Permanente nurses in Southern and Northern California and 6,200 nurses at Michigan Medicine who voted 96 percent to strike.

Biden has utilized the union bureaucracy to block strikes by even larger sections of workers, including in the decisive oil, rubber, steel and logistics sectors. The ruling class is seeking to impose the full cost of the economic crisis and escalating military confrontation with Russia and China on the backs of American workers.

The White House has colluded with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to block a strike by 28,000 West Coast dockworkers, who have been working without a contract since July 1. Biden has also collaborated with the railroad unions to head off a strike by 115,000 workers at CSX, BNSF, Union Pacific and other Class 1 railroads.

To block a rail strike, the unions backed Biden's appointment of a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB), which they claimed would make favorable recommendations for workers. Predictably, the PEB entirely sided with the companies' demands for deep cuts in real wages, the maintenance of unsafe work schedules and punitive attendance policies, which compel workers to remain on call virtually 24/7.

An article in *The Hill*, which covers the US Congress, expressed fear that the unions would not be able to hold back strike action once the federally mandated 30-day "cooling-off"

period expires on September 16. Noting that there was widespread opposition from workers to the pro-business recommendations by the PEB—already accepted by five of the 13 rail unions—it cites the comments of a White House official who told the publication, "After the pandemic and supply chain disruptions of the past two years, now is not the time for more uncertainty and disruption. Now is the time for the parties to resolve their differences, before the nation's economy begins responding to even the prospect of a nationwide rail stoppage."

The growing movement of the working class is leading to a direct confrontation with the Biden administration and its labor policemen in the trade unions. This is part of an international development, including in the United Kingdom, where offshore oil rig workers in the North Sea are set to carry out a 24-hour wildcat strike today in defiance of the energy contractors and unions.

This movement needs organization and political direction. The campaign of Will Lehman, a Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for the president of the United Auto Workers, points the way forward. Lehman is calling for the abolition of the corrupt UAW apparatus and the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to put power in the hands of workers on the shop floor. To fight the global corporations, he is calling on workers to coordinate their struggles across national boundaries under the direction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Commenting on the growing strike wave, Lehman told the WSWs, "Mainstream media does its best to suppress it, but right now many workers are entering into fights for the betterment of their working conditions and their families' living conditions.

"The only way we will win is going to be through solidarity across all sectors of the working class globally. The fight for better conditions is happening everywhere. We need to connect our struggles and shut down the system of exploitation together. The will is there. All we need is organization and a strategy to win."



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