

Educators' strikes spread across Pacific Northwest led by 6,000 Seattle teachers

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Seattle educators: Tell us about the conditions at your school and why you're striking! Contact the WSWWS by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The strike by over 6,000 Seattle teachers, paraeducators, counselors, aides and school staff is continuing as a wave of educators' strikes spreads across Washington state.

This teachers' movement is developing in one of the most expensive regions in the world, home to major corporations like Microsoft and Boeing. It is a struggle waged by teachers in defense of public education and the rights of the working class as a whole.

Since Seattle teachers launched their strike on September 7, over 110 teachers working for Eatonville School District, just south of Tacoma in Pierce County, Washington have joined the strike wave, shutting the town's five schools. Similar to Seattle teachers, the demands by educators in Eatonville are to reduce large class sizes and obtain sharp increases in pay.

In Tumwater, just outside the state capitol of Olympia, 90 paraprofessionals voted on Tuesday to authorize a strike if an agreement is not reached by Sunday between the Tumwater School District and the Tumwater Association of Paraprofessionals (TAP). The paraprofessionals' contract expired August 31. They are currently paid only \$20 an hour, untenable amid soaring inflation. This takes place as the unions desperately shut down a strike in the nearby Kent school district begun by teachers there on August 25.

The struggle by Seattle teachers is setting the tone for a broader fight. The district has so far not budged from its initial proposal, which does not include the largest demand of teachers for more special education and support staff.

"I would say our number one priority is fighting

against cuts and potential cuts in special education," a striking Seattle teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site* Friday. "We especially need staffing for special education and multi-lingual learning programs. Otherwise, it impacts the workloads for everybody and makes the caseload even worse for educators who have those specializations.

"We have a lot of students coming in with very limited English and we need to make sure they are learning all the content that's expected and learning English at the same time. I think most teachers would first talk about the way the district is trying to do away with accountability for any specific student support.

"The other thing is, of course, compensation, but especially for our lowest paid colleagues. One of the things we're looking for is yes, we're looking for an across the board percentage raise, but we're looking for a solid dollar amount for our workers who are making the least, I think \$6.50. That's starting to move towards a living wage."

Seattle Public Schools (SPS) is only offering a 5.5 percent wage increase for the 2022–23 school year, nearly half the current inflation rate, and an even more paltry 2.5 percent increase for the second and third years of the contract. It also claims it will provide an approximate cost of living adjustment if it calculates the implicit price deflator to be higher than the pay increase in the second and third years.

The district has offered only a single half-time social worker for each middle school and high school to address staffing concerns, though this does not help teachers during their day to day in the classroom. SPS also offers five additional nurses across the entire district in years two and three of the contract, but this is just a drop in the bucket, since the district currently has less than one nurse per school for each of the district's

more than 100 schools.

The striking Seattle teacher explained that it is not possible for teachers to survive at current pay rates:

“Seattle is such an expensive city, and I can’t imagine living on less than \$25 an hour. I wouldn’t want less than \$30. And even then, \$25 or \$30 might get you a room somewhere in the city, but it is not going to get you enough to have a family with kids.”

The same goes for other educators in the state. One Tumwater paraeducator spoke to *MyNorthwest*, stating, “I’ve watched a lot of paraeducators leave after 20+ years because they’re picking between gas and groceries. They can’t afford to come in and work with the students anymore and do the job they love...”

And near border with Oregon, approximately 200 teachers at the Ridgefield School District, north of Portland and on the border with Washington, went on strike Friday. Teachers at Ridgefield voted 92 percent to authorize a strike on August 29, but their union, the Ridgefield Education Association (REA), disregarded the vote and went back to bargaining with the district. The union was forced to call a strike after pressure from educators mounted demanding more paraeducators, better staffing ratios and higher wages.

The role of the unions in each struggle has been to keep strikes at bay for as long as possible, overriding strike authorization votes and working to keep any work actions as isolated as possible.

That there is no attempt to bring together the strikes by the various teachers unions is a tacit acknowledgement that any strike is a challenge to the suppression of struggles by the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Over the past year, numerous strikes have been suppressed by the trade unions, both of workers in education as well as other sections of the working class.

Educators in Seattle should pay special attention to the role of the SEA during the contract negotiations in 2018, which was shut down without meeting any of the demands of teachers. Instead, the union worked with the Democratic Party to do everything possible to avert a strike so as to not disrupt Seattle businesses, including Amazon, Microsoft and Starbucks. It also forced through the current contract, which has produced the current conditions of understaffing and low wages teachers are fighting against.

When asked about the role of the SEA in 2018, the Seattle teacher commented, “Ultimately what happened is that it felt like the negotiations happened and while the bargaining team made some progress, they ended up accepting a lot that was not what the general membership wanted. And then when we went back to teaching without voting on the TA, we felt we couldn’t go back out even if we wanted to because we had lost momentum by then.”

She also expressed interest in a rank-and-file committee of workers to break from the stranglehold of the union. “The idea is that people on the ground are the people making decisions? Yeah, I agree with that.”



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