

“We need more support; the kids need more support”

Seattle educators speak out on the consequences of understaffing, inadequate support and low pay

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Are you an educator, parent or student in Washington state? Contact us today to share your experiences, thoughts and ideas about what is at stake in the ongoing Seattle teachers strike. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Seattle teachers, paraeducators and support staff have been on strike since September 7, a week after their contract expired on August 31. The 6,000 workers are fighting for better classroom conditions, including more staff to aid the district’s tens of thousands of multi-lingual and English-language learning students, and higher wages for the lowest paid members. The latter demand is necessary to allow teachers to live in Seattle, a city with skyrocketing costs of living and vast levels of social inequality.

The struggle arises in the context of a growing movement of workers struggles across the US and internationally. In Washington state alone, hundreds of teachers and staff in several smaller districts have either gone on strike or authorized strikes, including in Eatonville, Ridgefield, Port Angeles and Tumfield. Teachers in Kent, a city just south of Seattle, concluded a weeklong strike last Wednesday, after the union scrambled to force through a tentative agreement the same morning that Seattle teachers began their struggle.

Several teachers spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the issues they confront, particularly the fight to win major improvements in staffing levels to adequately meet student needs.

One special education teacher told the WSW, “We are told over and over again how much the district cares about those furthest from educational justice and how we are doing so much to be inclusive and equitable. Yet the

district wants to keep taking away funding for jobs that support exactly that. Last year thousands of Sped [special education] staff were displaced from their jobs for ‘lack of need,’ but then our classes were left unsupported. We need more support, the kids need more support and they won’t get it if SPS keeps trying to cut corners and hoard funds. That’s why I support the strike. Enough is enough.”

Ibijoke, who has been teaching special education for five years at Rising Star Elementary School, stated, “A major Issue I’m seeing in the classroom is that special education students and English language learners are often overlooked outside of their small group instruction.

“Teachers need to be compensated for the extra time needed to differentiate instruction. This lack of time to collaborate and plan is a big reason why special education students are not thriving in the general education setting.

“Teachers should also be paid enough to live close to the communities that we work in. We need to have a sense of belonging in our communities as well. This helps us to understand our students better. Our staff at the lowest end of the pay scale shouldn’t feel the pressure to need to work several jobs when they leave such a big responsibility in the classrooms. We need to get them the pay they need so that they can focus on being the best support staff possible.”

Another teacher, who did not want to give her name for fear of retribution but will be referred to as Ana, said, “I think the mood of the teachers right now is really positive, because we feel like there’s a lot of community support. A lot of us are out here supporting things across the board. Pay comes up all the time, but for a lot of us, pay is not the top priority. It’s more about having the actual

funds to hire more staff and support students. We're fighting to eliminate what we see as cuts and potential for cuts, especially to staffing for special education for multilingual programs. That's the number one priority.

"The other thing is compensation, but especially for our lowest paid colleagues. We're looking for an across-the-board percentage raise to meet inflation. But we're also looking for a solid dollar amount on a chunk of our workers who are making less than \$20 an hour. We want raises that start to move towards a living wage. ... Overall, something like 30 percent of educators in Seattle say that they will probably leave the district in the next five years. There appears to be more turnover for some of those lower paid positions."

One of the central components of the SPS contract proposal is the promotion of "inclusion," which refers to the integration of students with disabilities into the general education setting rather than being segregated into separate spaces. The district writes in its proposal, "Inclusion is realized when all students, regardless of their designation to receive special education services, are provided with targeted services, supports, and accommodations, allowing them to learn in the general education classroom, interact with peers, and engage the core curriculum."

Inclusion is a progressive educational model, with overwhelming evidence that demonstrates benefits for students with disabilities and the general student body. Washington is currently considered one of the least inclusive states, ranking 44th out of 50, because "only 57 percent of students receiving special education services are included in general education settings for 80 to 100 percent of the school day."

However, teachers have been highly critical of the district's proposal because there are no commitments to adequate staffing and case workload limits. Educators know that the benefits can only be achieved if there are ample resources, trained staff and supports in place, a scenario that is miles away from the disastrous state of public education today.

"Speaking from personal experience, I have seen a lot of people leaving in the middle of the year. We have had some folks who went on leave partway through the year due to mental health, a burnout situation. Sometimes we have reliable substitute teachers. But overall, we had a situation with a class where we couldn't hire a long term, we just didn't have anyone lined up."

When asked what she thinks about the absence of COVID-19 and monkeypox health and safety in the SEA-

SPS negotiations, she said, "Yeah, it's definitely not being addressed to the degree that I think a lot of people would benefit from. I can't speak to it a lot, but it seems that the primary purpose that schools are relied upon to be is like child care in all its forms, so that adults can go to work, which is a very frustrating, frustrating idea.

"When there's a strike, the first questions are about child care. And it's understandable, but it's also a function of the fact that we're living in a system where that if folks don't go to work, then they can't feed themselves. ... I think for a lot of educators the fact that the schools were pushed to reopen and stay open is very much about getting adults to work and particularly back to work in-person."

Although she is a relatively new teacher, Ana explained that she and her coworkers have been reflecting on the last Seattle teachers' strike in 2015, as well as the sellout agreements reached during the 2018 and 2019 contract negotiations. "Over many conversations, I am just hearing about what happened in 2015. Folks described how negotiations happened, the bargaining team is under a lot of pressure and ends up in a position where they accept a lot, but then the things they accepted are not what the general membership wanted or communicated. But because the [SEA] shuts down the strike before the TA is voted on, we've lost momentum then. Because we've already gone back, things have gone 'back to normal,' and people feel like they're tired."

Ana explained that a rank-and-file teacher proposed an amendment during the strike authorization vote last Monday that requires the approval of the contract by the membership prior to returning to the classrooms, attempting to prevent a repeat of the past. "We really want to feel like we have that power to negotiate further if we feel like it's needed. Because we are a whole union membership. Especially with having such diverse types of jobs within the membership, it's important."



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