Seattle educators outraged after Seattle Education Association forcibly shuts down strike

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Our reporters
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Educators at Seattle Public Schools and their supporters are outraged that the strike by Seattle teachers was shut down Tuesday by the Seattle Education Association (SEA) before a tentative agreement (TA) was reached. Teachers were ordered back to school and have been working without a contract since Wednesday.

"We still have not received a full agreement. Everyone is feeling very betrayed," wrote one special education teacher to the WSWS.

The strike was ended by means of an antidemocratic maneuver by the SEA, which declared a TA had been reached late Monday evening and called a vote to end the strike on Tuesday. The vote ran roughshod over an earlier resolution passed by the rank and file to stay on strike until teachers had time to study and then vote on the complete TA. While it passed 57 percent to 43 percent, many teachers have expressed concerns with the legitimacy of the vote, which was done online and entirely controlled by the SEA, with no rank-and-file oversight.

"We had a major issue with people having access to the meeting," the teacher continued. "I really don't think that all of the members were given an opportunity to vote.

Another SPS teacher expressed concerns over the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, which has been a major concern of teachers, but is not addressed at all in any of the "summaries" of the contract provided by the SEA. "I am deeply concerned about COVID-19 in the fall. Many educators got sick and were unable to work, and many students had cases as well.

"As someone teaching in a diverse south Seattle community, I am deeply concerned for the many grandparents and older relatives living in multi-generational immigrant households, as well as the long-term health of my students and their families … Our new contract does not offer any COVID sick leave protection (one of the few "bare minimum" accommodations by the district during last year). The implicit messaging from the district is that educators are all expected to "get COVID eventually" and that we should suck it up and do it for our students, because they know that many educators are willing to make that sacrifice and we are disposable to them."

He also commented on the ongoing struggle by 100,000 railroad workers, who are outraged at the attempts by the unions to sabotage their struggle in collusion with the rail corporations and the Biden administration. "I can express nothing but support for the rail workers, who are the backbone of our economy and make our society function. Labor, from workers, is what sustains life and society—not bosses and capital.

"Even if our leadership does not always represent us, our collective labor has power and we amplify that when we support each other in the struggle. I hope that the railroad workers stand strong, and know that many teachers of the Seattle Public School district support their struggle."

The need to unite the struggles of all sections of the working class was further underscored by the sellout of a strike by 110 teachers at the Eatonville School District, just south of Tacoma, by the Eatonville Education Association. As with the recent strike by

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teachers in nearby Kent, the unions are determined to isolate the struggles of teachers district by district so as to not challenge the Democratic Party apparatus that dominates Washington state.

Teachers also spoke on the broader issues they are facing. They went on strike September 7 demanding better staffing ratios, especially for special education and multilingual students, as well as for better pay, in particular for paraeducators and support staff, who make less than $20 an hour. Teachers report having to drive from Tacoma, about an hour away, because they cannot afford to live in the district in which they teach.

"We must consider what it means to adequately serve students," another teacher commented, a theme expressed again and again during the strike. "English language learners and students with special needs need consistency and the district does nothing to retain these teachers. There is a massive turnover rate. The support staff is so important. It's the heart and soul of the school. They can't afford to live in Seattle.

"I couldn't tell you how many unfilled positions we had last year. It's incredibly stressful. The students are the ones who suffer. These proposals by the district are a slap in students' faces. How do you explain to students why teachers are leaving? Students become close to teachers and changes in staffing are terrible for students' mental health."

Another special education access teacher we spoke with said she understood that there is a rainy-day fund that SPS has accumulated during the pandemic. "Well, it's raining!" she said, "There definitely is a broader issue of needing more money for public education, but also spending the money that we already have more appropriately. Like on the actual people working in the schools instead of people higher up in the district who don't have day-to-day interactions with the students. We should be funding the people who have the biggest impact on students."

There has also been a great deal of support for the teachers from the broader working class. On social media, one local Seattle resident commented about Tuesday's vote, "57 [percent] is not a strong show of support, and honestly makes me concerned for the mental health of teachers." A parent wrote, "I support continuing the strike until everyone has a chance to read the full agreement and vote on it. I don't trust SPS at ALL and the best lever you've got right now is to NOT suspend the strike."

A supporter of Seattle teachers in their strike and fellow educator told the WSWS, "It makes no sense to give up a bargaining position when you don't know exactly what you'll be signing up for. A summary won't be good enough. SEA must allow ample time for all members to read and understand the full proposed agreement. Vote NO!"

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