

# “We are ready to vote ‘no’ because this fails to meet student and community needs”: Seattle teacher opposes union-backed sell out contract

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On Monday, teachers and other school employees are voting on a Tentative Agreement (TA) reached between the Seattle Education Association (SEA) and Seattle Public Schools (SPS). The SEA is seeking to ram through the concessionary agreement after forcibly “suspending” the powerful five-day strike by 6,000 educators last Tuesday and forcing staff back into the schools before seeing, let alone, voting on the deal.

Teachers and support staff received the TA Friday evening and only had the weekend to review it before voting. Monday’s rushed vote is the culmination of a series of anti-democratic maneuvers by the SEA and district to suppress the opposition of teachers and support staff to budget cuts and the dangerous return to school as the pandemic again surges.

The SEA’s actions, which demonstrated the contempt of the union apparatus towards the workers they falsely claim to “represent,” follows the same pattern of other sellouts overseen the National Education Association and its local affiliates. This includes the recent strikes of Columbus, Ohio and Sacramento, California teachers earlier this year. In every case, the NEA affiliated unions, like their counterparts in the American Federation of Teachers, isolated the struggles, collaborated with local Democratic Party officials and forced through austerity contracts.

The TA meets none of the demands of Seattle teachers and support staff for a livable wage for all workers, adequate staffing and resources in special education and multilingual programs, as well as protection from COVID-19 among other demands for more resources for schools and services. It includes below inflation-rate wage increases for educators who live in one of the most expensive urban centers in the country.

The SEA and state and local Democrats are terrified that teachers would unite with the growing wave of working-class resistance to inflation, austerity and social inequality. Educators across Washington in Kent and Eatonville recently had their strikes isolated and shut down by their respective unions. Mental health workers at Kaiser Permanente in northern California have been on strike since early August and 1,200 Weyerhaeuser lumber workers began a strike at facilities in Washington and Oregon last week.

Across the US, more than 100,000 railroad workers were poised to go on strike last Friday before the unions worked out a last minute deal with the Biden administration and the railroads to temporarily

block the walkout.

Teachers and support staff in Seattle must take matters into their own hands. First, they should overwhelmingly reject the sellout deal. This must be combined with electing rank-and-file committees at every school as real centers of workers’ decision-making power and to countermand the antidemocratic maneuvers of the SEA apparatus.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a teacher in Seattle Public Schools who, reflecting the sentiments of many teachers and support staff in the district, expressed immense opposition to the suspension of the strike and the TA. She detailed how many teachers were excluded from the vote to suspend the strike, which SEA officials claimed passed by 57 percent.

“The strike was suspended on unfair terms,” the teacher told the WSWS. “There were many technical issues, such as many members not receiving a link to the meeting, each individual receiving a unique Zoom link (which prevented members from sharing a link to others who did not receive one), and the aggressive tone of SEA President Jennifer Matter, all combined to leave a very negative impression of the proceedings.

“I believe that our negotiation power is derived from our power to strike and stay on strike. By agreeing to resume work on the basis of a TA summary (and not even a full tentative agreement), SPS is left with the freedom to renege on anything, and many educators will now feel emotionally blackmailed into accepting a mediocre contract because they want to do right by our community and students. SPS knows that and is using it to strategically break down moral.

“On top of that, the TA failed to deliver on any of the demands we had made for better staffing and support for special education, and the ‘raise’ they were trying to pitch as a big win isn’t even enough to keep up with inflation. It’s actually a loss of real wages relative to our last contract. Although our vote was ‘fair’ and democratic, the technical issues that kept members from connecting, as well what felt like Jennifer Matter pushing extremely hard for us to accept the TA, did not make me feel represented at the bargaining table.

“My colleagues in my building are frustrated, angry, and upset. We are here first and foremost for our students, and it angers us to see the district leverage that against us in bargaining and to see our union let them get away with it. However, we are still ready to fight and to vote ‘no’ on the TA because it fails to meet student and community needs.”

The SPS teacher continued: “I am planning on voting ‘no’ on the proposed TA. Even if the summary TA is followed in full, the summary already failed to my main two issues—proper staffing and support for special education (not cuts dressed up as ‘inclusion’ by district PR), and fair compensation for my Instructional Assistant and classified colleagues, who are not paid a livable Seattle wage.

“In general, the TA is about what teachers expected, which is not good. It’s kind of just the same as it was last time, which already had so many problems. The district has spent so much time talking about mental health support for students and we’re still maintaining the 500-to-1 student-counselor ratio. Overall it’s pretty bad.”

The teacher was asked to describe the conditions in the schools leading up to the strike and, in particular how the pandemic and staffing crisis has impacted the public schools.

“I am entering my third year as a teacher, and my Master’s in teaching was completed in 2019-2020. A portion of my student teaching was conducted online during my training, so I have only experienced COVID conditions in the profession.

“I had no delusion entering the profession that teaching was going to be easy. I wanted to positively impact students and I was prepared to work hard. However, nothing prepared me for COVID teaching conditions, and even more so the inflexibility and callousness of the district to student and educator needs. We have been constantly understaffed due to building and district level COVID cases and educator burnout, and our building was regularly operating on 70-80 percent staffing, enough for it to occasionally cause safety and supervision issues.

“However, our district policy ensured that we were forced to remain open, even if we were strained to our limit. Our online/hybrid year in 2020-2021 was hard, but 2021-2022 was even more difficult. Students were brought back to the classroom traumatized and with emotional and mental health needs, yet the messaging from the district was that these concerns were secondary to meeting standardized test targets, which our funding is tied to. The conditions took a severe toll on me personally and I was for a short time forced to stop working, as the stress had caused me to stop eating until I had lost a dangerous amount of weight to the degree that it was causing me physical harm. I know for my colleagues working in special education, they have had to struggle with even more than I have had to.”

Regarding COVID, the WSWS asked what teachers are concerned about at the start of the school year now that mask mandates, COVID testing and other mitigation methods have been lifted, even as cases still spread widely.

“I am deeply concerned about COVID 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 multigenerational immigrant households, as well as the long-term health of my students and their families, especially when COVID is still so poorly understood and we have no idea what the long-term potential effects of Long COVID could be. 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 for our students, because they know that many educators are willing to make that sacrifice and we are disposable to them.”

Reporters asked the teacher what she thought about the WSWS’ call for educators to form rank-and-file committees of teachers, school

workers, and parents to take the initiative out of the hands of the union apparatus.

“Folks at my building just met today exactly about that, and planning how we can connect with and organize with other school sites to take action independently of the union structure.

“To develop that kind of trust and shared struggle, there has to be first and foremost relationship building, and connection. I actually felt connected with people in my own school buildings, for example, for the first time over the past couple of weeks.

“I think purposefully, the district does kind of isolate us and keep us within our own buildings so that we cannot build that kind of connection.

Commenting on the role of the SEA, the educator said, “It definitely felt like the function of the strike was a pressure release valve for the frustrations that teachers have. We’re out on the streets, we’re building solidarity, we’re building power, and the district is like, great, you guys can blow off your steam while we throw the same sloppy contract and send you all back into classrooms.

“This was really apparent in the SEA meeting with President Jennifer Matter. We kept re-voting on a bunch of different amendments over and over again, it definitely kind of felt we were railroaded into breaking our strike. Especially because of the formulation of a lot of the amendments, which had a lot of double negatives, even triple negatives. It was like, ‘Are we approving to not amend the amendment to the original motion to terminate the strike?’ You almost had to pass a reading comprehension test.”

Asked about uniting educators with railroad and other workers to build up a unified struggle for better standards of living and working conditions, the educator responded:

“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. Under the expansion of neoliberalism, unions have been dismantled en masse, and the ones that survive are often defanged and serve more as a mouthpiece for bureaucrats than as a defender of labor.

“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. Losing battles doesn’t mean losing the war.”



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