

Lessons of the 2022 Seattle teachers strike

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21 September 2022

The Seattle Education Association (SEA) announced Tuesday morning that its proposed contract, formally three separate tentative agreements for classified, paraprofessional and certificated educators, had been ratified. The union SEA reported that 4,143 of its members voted and that the agreements passed by 82 percent (classified), 66 percent (paraprofessionals) and 71 percent (certified teachers).

While the SEA presents the results as an expression of the “unity” of educators under union leadership, at most only about half voted for the contract, with just under a third abstaining from the whole process out of disgust.

SEA officials shut down the powerful week-long strike by 6,000 educators on September 14 and sent teachers back to the classrooms days before the ratification vote. By breaking the momentum of their struggle, the SEA executives knew it would be more difficult for teachers to resume the strike, which is what a rejection of the TA would have meant.

The SEA’s action was in open defiance of a resolution proposed and passed by the rank-and-file to stay on strike until a TA was ratified. In fact, the SEA ended the strike through antidemocratic maneuvers, including a pressured vote to “suspend” the strike that had no oversight from the membership.

At the same time, the union itself admitted that the TA had not been “finalized” and only presented the full text to teachers three days later. Teachers then had only a single weekend to review the contract before being told to vote on it.

The deal did nothing to address educators’ central demands—more special education staff to support the myriad and multilingual needs of the district’s estimated 49,000 students. Educators also wanted sharp increases in wages amid skyrocketing costs of living in Seattle, particularly for paraprofessionals and classified staff who often make less than \$20 an hour.

There was also no mention in any of the contracts or during any union meetings of the ongoing threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds die from the deadly yet preventable disease and thousands fall victim to Long COVID every day and the pathogen remains a major concern of educators the world over as schools are a

prominent vector of viral transmission. Yet the matter has been dropped wholesale as unions enforce the Biden administration’s policy of compelling workers to “live with the virus.”

The attitude of the mega-corporations that are based in Seattle and Washington state—including Boeing, Microsoft, Starbucks, Amazon—was summed up in an article published last week in the *Seattle Times*, which asked of the tentative agreement, “Can the district afford it?” The article notes that the now ratified agreement will cost \$228 million and claims that it will add \$92 million to the district’s budget shortfall over the next three years. It then laments that “more than 80 [percent] of the district’s budget goes toward salaries,” a less than subtle assertion that even the meager wages paid to teachers are too much.

The possibility that the aforementioned big businesses and their multimillionaire and multibillionaire executives should be taxed is never considered. Nor is any mention made of the tens of billions of dollars being made available to Ukraine as part of the US/NATO proxy war against Russia. No doubt money will be shifted around to maintain the contract by cutting social programs elsewhere and will be used provocatively in attempts to divide and isolate educators from the broader working class.

But Seattle teachers drew wide support during their strike and over the course of their struggle. Parents and students stood on picket lines and expressed their support in person and on social media for the fight being waged, recognizing that the demands raised by teachers reflect the demands of the working class as a whole.

Moreover, the strike occurred alongside an escalating surge of the class struggle, including several concurrent strikes and contract fights of educators across Washington state, New York City, as well as Canada and Australia. West coast dockworkers have been without a contract for months and their fellows in British Columbia, Quebec and the United Kingdom have gone on strike. And even now a strike of 100,000 railroad workers looms, despite the efforts of the unions, the rail corporations and the Biden administration to prevent railroad workers from making their might felt.

And while their TA has been ratified, the fight by Seattle

teachers is far from over. The full consequences of the deal that was forced on them have yet to be felt, and educators will respond. They will rejoin the unfolding arena of the class struggle throughout the United States and internationally.

The most pressing need is a conscious assimilation of the lessons of their strike.

The suppression of the strike is above all the result of the systematic treachery of the trade unions, locally by the SEA and coordinated by the National Education Association (NEA). From the beginning, the orientation of the unions was to avoid a real fight at all costs and to end a strike, if it came about, as soon as possible. The amendment demanding a vote on the TA before ending the strike was only allowed because the union had every intention of running roughshod over the rights of its members in order to contain the struggle.

In contrast, educators were determined to regain lost ground after successive sellout contracts, particularly since the strike in 2015, which was also suppressed by the union and resulted in a similar sellout contract. There has been particular push back against the “inclusion” model by Seattle Public Schools for children in special education, which places such students among the broader population. While such integration can have positive benefits, every student ultimately suffers when schools aren’t sufficiently staffed to attend to students’ individual needs, the real situation in Seattle schools. In effect, classroom sizes are increased, staff are cut and the quality of education for every student is degraded.

That the SEA produced a contract that at best maintained the existing, and dreadful, state of affairs speaks to the objective function of the corporatist unions. They do not serve the working class but are in reality agents of the corporations and the capitalist state, particularly the Democratic Party. The NEA and its counterpart, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), recently took part in a “town hall” meeting hosted by the Biden administration to reassure the administration and Wall Street that schools will open this autumn and remain open even as the coronavirus pandemic continues to rage, no matter how many teachers and children die.

Unions are opposed to teachers uniting with other teachers—as evinced by the isolation of Seattle teachers from their striking brothers and sisters in Kent, Eatonville, Ridgefield and elsewhere—let along fighting alongside workers in other industries in the US and internationally.

Yet the strike by Seattle teachers is one manifestation of the trajectory of the global class struggle. Workers are increasingly coming into direct conflict with the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions, the mainstream media,

major corporations, the Republicans and Democrats, and ultimately capitalism itself. All these forces are aligned in defending the existing social order. The NEA, AFT and other organizations are unions in name only. In reality they divide the working class and function as a labor police force for the corporations and their political servants.

The only way forward for workers has been demonstrated by the *World Socialist Web Site* through its call for the formation of rank-and-file committees to unite teachers and the entire working class. In Seattle, the formation of these committees is critical to prepare to fight back against the ongoing assaults on wages and working conditions. They must be unified with factory and workplace committees internationally under the banner of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to wage a combined struggle against the political apparatus arrayed against workers and against the capitalist system itself.

The high point of this campaign today is the struggle being waged by Mack Trucks autoworker Will Lehman, who is running for president of the UAW. Lehman is running not to reform the bureaucracy, but to overthrow it and to establish full rank-and-file control over contracts and safety. He is running as a socialist, explaining to autoworkers and every section of the working class that socialism means a society based on equality, where production is controlled democratically and not on behalf of a tiny ruling elite.

Educators in Seattle must follow Lehman’s example. A new leadership must be forged by the rank-and-file, one which will establish the independent initiative and organization of workers, raise their political and social consciousness and clarify the fundamental class issues faced by every worker. Teachers must join the growing mass movement of the working class against capitalism and for socialism, in this country and in all others.



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