

2,800 Akron teachers set to strike Monday

Samuel Davidson
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A strike by 2,800 Akron, Ohio, teachers and educators could begin Monday. The members of the Akron Education Association (AEA) have been working without a contract since last June.

The Akron School Board is demanding that teachers accept a contract which will effectively cut their wages, forcing teachers to pay more for their health coverage. Teachers are also concerned about deteriorating working conditions, with an increasing number of acts of violence towards both teachers and other students.

Last November, Akron teachers voted by 99 percent to reject a fact-finders' report that essentially backed the school board proposals. After several meetings, in which the school district did not even send people authorized to make decisions, the Akron Education Association issued a 10-day notice of intent to strike on December 29.

The school district has hired a strikebreaking firm, HuffMaster, to recruit replacements for the striking teachers. The district announced that all students must attend online classes starting Monday run by administrators and other staff.

This measure has nothing to do with educating students. No steps have been taken to ensure that students have computers, high speed internet or the resources at home to continue lessons. In most cases the administrators will count attendance for state and federal funding purposes while providing no actual education, merely handing out assignments to students.

While teachers and other educators have shown enormous determination to fight, a warning must be given—just as when the Columbus, Ohio, teachers struck at the start of the school year—the state and national NEA and AFT will work to isolate the teachers and force them to return to work with none of their basic demands met.

Of most concern to both teachers, parents and students is the scrapping of all measures to address the

resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The union and the school district met with a federal mediator on Thursday and will meet again on Saturday, but remain far apart on issues of wages and health benefits.

On wages the district is offering just 1.95 percent increases in each of the three years. This is effectively a wage cut, since just in the time that teachers have been without a contract, inflation has surpassed that amount. The fact finders increased that to 2.25, 2.25 and 2.5 percent in each year of the contract. Teachers had been asking for a 7 percent raise, but lowered that to 5 percent, still below the inflation rate.

The school board also wants teachers to begin paying for their health insurance, which itself would absorb most of their pay increase.

Another concern of teachers has been the increased levels of school violence, the product of mounting social tensions in the largely working class district. So far this year there have been 63 assaults against teachers reported as well as two stabbings of students by other students, a girl being dragged by her hair and a loaded gun being brought into school.

Rather than acknowledging the concerns of teachers, the school board is seeking to change the definition of “assault” from contact to being injured. Teachers point out that acts such as shoving, pushing, slapping and even punching that doesn't leave a bruise or other injury would not be considered an assault.

The union has pointed to the fact that metal detectors are only used on a random basis, instead of full time, resulting in guns and knives being brought into classrooms.

The AEA has complained that while the school district has pledged to spend more money on security, it did not apply for grants that could have been used for that purpose and is instead taking money away from other education funds.

Neither the AEA nor the Akron Public Schools seek to address the root of the problem—the intense social crisis, exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, that confronts teachers, students and the broader community.

In the final analysis, the growth of violence in schools cannot be addressed with more policing of students. Akron Public Schools already has one of the highest suspension and expulsion rates of any school district in the state.

The growth of violence in public schools is a reflection of the broader social and economic violence being dished out every day to the working class.

Since the Biden administration has declared that the pandemic is officially over, additional aid to schools, students and families has been cut. Programs that provided funds for additional school counselors and social workers have been cut. The free school lunch and breakfast programs for all students have been eliminated.

The expanded child tax credit was eliminated in January 2022, driving many families into poverty. Many working and low-income families are faced with making decisions about paying rent or buying food, clothing or even medicine.

Over the past three years, students have witnessed family members get sick and die during a preventable pandemic, in which the deliberate policy of the ruling class has been to reopen businesses and schools regardless of the loss of life. In the Akron area alone over 2,000 people have needlessly died from COVID-19.

Every day, working class and low-income communities are confronted with continuous harassment and violence from the police.

Last year, 25-year-old Jayland Walker was shot over 60 times by Akron police as he attempted to flee. Police continued to fire into Walker's body even as he lay on the pavement.

In response to protests, Democratic Akron Mayor Dan Horrigan sanctioned a police riot against people outraged over Walker's brutal murder.

Meanwhile, critical resources needed for education and other public services have been gutted to pay for tax handouts to the rich and to fuel endless wars on behalf of corporate interests.

Akron teachers should take a warning from the

experience of Columbus teachers, who despite showing enormous determination were saddled with a contract that met none of their basic demands in a betrayal engineered by their own union. The Columbus Education Association called a snap vote on the sellout deal, not allowing teachers time to study the contract and blocking teachers from speaking in opposition to the contract.

To prevent a similar betrayal of their struggle, Akron educators should organize their own rank-and-file committee, independent of the AEA, to map out a strategy to win their demands. This should include reaching out to other teachers coming into struggle and broader sections of the working class.

The Pennsylvania-Ohio Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee invites teachers to join our committee and take up this fight. Sign up to receive more information.



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