

Woburn, Massachusetts teachers vote overwhelmingly for strike action as state threatens retaliation with anti-strike law

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30 January 2023

Teachers in Woburn, Massachusetts voted overwhelmingly for strike action on Friday, setting the stage for a strike Monday morning. The approximately 550 teachers, paraprofessionals and nurses, members of the Woburn Teachers Association (WTA), have been working without a contract since August.

Hundreds of educators, students, parents and other supporters rallied Saturday afternoon in the city's downtown ahead of the planned strike.

The Woburn School Committee had filed a petition with the state Department of Labor Relations on January 24 to "investigate an illegal strike," after learning that the WTA was planning to hold a strike vote.

Shortly before the Saturday rally began, the School Committee announced that the Commonwealth Employment Relations Board had issued a ruling Friday evening mandating the union to cease strike-related activities and resume negotiations.

Under a reactionary, antidemocratic state law, strikes by public sector workers in Massachusetts are illegal. The Haverhill Education Association (HEA) was fined and paid out \$360,000 for a four-day strike in October of last year by educators in that city.

Negotiators for the WTA and the Woburn School Committee resumed talks at 10 a.m. Sunday morning and said they would be negotiating throughout the day. The most recent agreement between the WTA and the Woburn School Committee was reached in January 2021 and included a paltry 1 percent pay increase for one year.

In a statement, the WTA said it was asking for pay increases for education support professionals, smaller class sizes and twice-a-week physical education classes for elementary school students. The union and the School Committee said an agreement was reached between Woburn Public Schools and the WTA in October, but

union members did not ratify that contract.

The School Committee and Woburn Mayor Scott Galvin, who is also a member of the committee, issued a statement on Friday saying that the planned strike for Monday was "illegal, disruptive and unnecessary."

They claim that a contract proposal made by the School Committee on January 18 and rejected by educators "is a fair and highly competitive offer that allows for reduced class sizes, additional collaborative professional development and increased instructional time for students" as well as a "generous wage increase" that is in addition to step increases that approximately 50 percent of educators received at the start of the 2022-2023 school year.

Section 9A(a) of the Massachusetts Public Employee Collective Bargaining Law Guide "prohibits public employees and employee organizations from striking or inducing, encouraging, or condoning a work stoppage by public employees." The law states falsely, "Public employees have no constitutional right to strike." It adds that employees engaged in a "work to rule," in which they "abstain in whole or in part from the performance of duties," can also be held in violation of the anti-strike legislation.

Teachers unions in at least two other districts have been fined under the anti-strike legislation over the past year. After a four-day strike by teachers in Haverhill in October, the HEA was fined and recently paid \$110,000 to the state for violating a contempt of court order. Brookline teachers were fined \$50,000 for a one-day strike last May.

The fine in Haverhill is in addition to the \$200,000 of teachers' dues money the HEA agreed to pay to the Haverhill School Committee to "cover reimbursement of expenses and/or damages that the committee incurred

from October 17 until the teachers returned to work October 21,” plus \$50,000 for a student scholarship program, both of which are to be paid “to the Haverhill Public Schools and delivered on or before June 1, 2023.”

In addition to the fine and payments to the district totaling \$360,000, HEA President Tim Briggs said the HEA are being asked to pay \$500,000 in damages to the city. The union has accepted the legitimacy of the state’s claim that the strike by Haverhill teachers was illegal and that teachers have no constitutional right to strike. It has agreed without protest to hand over educators’ dues money to pay the fines.

At the time of the contract signing, Briggs said he had a “verbal agreement” that the district would not be seeking additional payments above the \$250,000 the union had already agreed to hand over.

Immediately following the signing of the tentative agreement, the HEA ordered the Haverhill teachers back to work before teachers had seen the contract and voted on it. The union announced: “All HEA members are to return to their regular work assignments and perform all of their regular duties on October 20, 2022, unless otherwise excused.”

The tentative agreement did not address any of the demands by teachers that led to the strike in the first place. While teachers were calling for raises that at least met, if not surpassed, the rate of inflation, the agreement included only a 10 percent raise over the course of the three-year contract: 4 percent in 2023, followed by 3 percent in each of the following two years, far below the current rate of inflation.

The WSWS spoke to a Haverhill special education teacher on the picket line during the strike, who said of the cost of living, “We know that energy prices are going to increase in the upcoming months due to the shortage of natural gas and what’s going on in Ukraine. And when prices go up, they’re not going to come back down.”

The contract agreed to by the HEA amounted to a significant cut in real wages.

Massachusetts is currently experiencing the second largest wave of COVID infections since the beginning of the pandemic, but the Haverhill contract makes no mention of COVID-19 or teacher and classroom safety, another demand raised by teachers. Throughout the pandemic, the teachers unions have played a key role in forcing students and educators back into the classroom under conditions where virtually all COVID mitigation measures have been abandoned, promoting conditions of never-ending sickness, disability and death for teachers,

students and their families.

Teachers union leaders have agreed to sellout contracts in districts across the state over the past year, including in Boston, Melrose and Brookline. Despite the determination on the part of teachers to fight for wage increases to keep up with inflation and improvements to working conditions and teacher and student safety, the Massachusetts teachers unions have kept educators on the job without a contract for months or even years, and done everything in their power to avoid strike action.

Earlier in January, after nearly 200 days working without a contract, over 99 percent of Melrose teachers voted to authorize a strike. However, a strike that was set to begin January 17 was averted when a deal was agreed to by the Melrose Education Association. The deal included “cost-of-living and market adjustments” totaling only 10 percent over the course of a three-year contract, again far below the rate of inflation.

Weymouth Public Schools teachers are currently working without a contract. In December, Quincy teachers protested outside school committee meetings to demand better pay and benefits, including more family leave and longevity pay.

In struggle after struggle, the teachers unions have suppressed strikes and worked to shut them down when they have been forced to call them by the membership. Fines such as those paid by the HEA should not be accepted. Teachers in Woburn and other districts should reject the threats of the state to fine them for exercising their democratic right to strike and order their union leadership not to hand over their dues money to the state.

Educators should build rank-and-file committees that bring together teachers, parents and students from across all state districts to organize united action to defend teachers’ pay and working conditions and fight for the defense of safe, quality education.



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