

Woburn, Massachusetts teachers strike continues in face of injunction and court-ordered fines

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2 February 2023

Teachers in Woburn, Massachusetts, struck for a fourth day on Thursday in defiance of a court-ordered injunction. Woburn public schools were expected to be closed on Friday due to frigid temperatures hitting the region. More than 500 teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses and others, members of the Woburn Teachers Association (WTA), have been working without a contract since August.

The strike has earned the wrath of the city's school committee and Democratic Mayor Scott Galvin, who declared, "Teachers have no right to go on strike and use the children as a bargaining chip in negotiations." In fact, parents and students are solidly behind the teachers, seeing a connection between the educators' fight for a decent contract and the defense of public education, which is under brutal attack in the current economic climate. Woburn families have been a regular presence on the teachers' picket lines.

"Full support, strike for full demands and then some more until the fees are dropped," read one post on Reddit. Another read, "Speaking as a resident of Woburn and also as a sub separate special ed teacher in a district who is possibly going to strike soon, this is absolute BS. Our one-to-one paraprofessionals deserve so much more than what they get, I would love to see an administrator try to step into their job for just one day without walking out or crying. They should be ashamed of themselves."

Educators are determined to win pay increases that will protect them from inflation and increased funding for public schools. They have overwhelmingly rejected not one but two proposals WTA officials have reached with the district and Mayor Scott.

The Woburn School Committee and Mayor Galvin

responded to the walkout by requesting that the Massachusetts Superior Court issue a strike-breaking injunction against the teachers. On Wednesday afternoon, Judge Maureen Mulligan slapped the WTA with an injunction and threatened to fine the union \$40,000 if the educators continued to strike past 7:30 p.m. that day, with an additional \$5,000 to be levied for each day the strike continued after that.

Under a reactionary, century-old 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 2022 by educators in that city. HEA President Tim Briggs said the union is being asked to pay an additional \$500,000 in damages to the city.

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."

Teachers in numerous school districts across the state are currently working without a contract, and there is a fear on the part of local school districts that educators will be emboldened by the strike in Woburn to strike themselves to meet their demands for improved wages and conditions in the face of the skyrocketing cost of living and deteriorating conditions in the public schools.

The WTA says it is asking for pay increases for education support professionals, smaller class sizes and twice-a-week physical education classes for elementary school students. In November, educators rejected by 98 percent a WTA-backed deal, which included a derisory

raise of 6 percent over three years. Educators rejected another union-backed proposal in early December, which included a slightly increased offer of 10 percent over three years.

Woburn teachers earn an average of \$85,000 a year, while paraprofessionals (teacher's aides) make poverty wages of only \$22,621. The cost of living in Woburn is 41 percent higher than the national average, with housing costs 83 percent higher than the average, according to PayScale.com. Betterplaces.net estimates the statewide cost of living is 27.5 percent higher than the national average, and housing costs a staggering 75 percent higher. Massachusetts is the ninth worst of the 50 US states in income inequality.

Mayor Galvin and the school committee say they have offered a 10.75 percent raise for teachers and a 40 percent raise for paraprofessionals over the next three years. The WTA has proposed a 14.75 percent increase for teachers, a counterproposal that Galvin, who is also a member of the school committee, calls "outrageous."

The union's demand for a 14.75 percent increase for teachers would not keep up with inflation, which stood at 6.5 percent for the 12 months ending December 2022, and would, in fact, represent a *decrease* in real wages. And a 40 percent pay increase for paraprofessionals would bring them just above the already abysmal federal poverty line for a family of four in 2023.

WTA President Barbara Locke has said the city has more than enough to afford the 14.75 percent increase the union is asking for, citing Woburn's \$68 million in unused taxes. But the WTA and its parent union, the National Education Association (NEA), have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to accept the austerity terms set by the Democrats and Republicans and the corporate interests they serve.

Educators in cities and towns across Massachusetts are currently working without contracts, including in Amherst, Weymouth, Quincy and Worcester. The contract for teachers in Cambridge, one of the largest districts, expires in August.

Teachers in Boston, the state's largest district, ratified a three-year contract in September 2022 after being kept in the classrooms for a year by the Boston Teachers Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers. The contract includes only a 9.5 percent increase over the course of the agreement, again far

below the rate of inflation.

Educators must begin with what they and their students need, not with what the corporate-controlled politicians say is affordable. Massachusetts is home to 22 billionaires and some of the largest pharmaceutical, technology and other corporations. On a national scale, both big business parties have found trillions for corporate bailouts and war.

To fight for this, educators should build rank-and-file committees that transfer decision-making power from the union bureaucracies to the striking workers themselves. These committees should unite teachers, parents and students from across all state districts and mobilize broader sections of the working class to oppose the strikebreaking injunction and defend the right to educators and other public workers to strike.



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