

Union shuts down strike after Woburn, Massachusetts teachers defy injunction

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The Woburn Teachers Association (WTA) has ordered striking teachers, nurses and paraprofessionals to return to work after a weeklong walkout in Woburn, Massachusetts, 12 miles north of Boston.

Educators have waged a courageous fight in defiance of the Democratic Party-dominated political establishment, the Woburn School Committee, Mayor Scott Galvin and the courts, which have issued two injunctions and imposed massive fines on the teachers' union.

WTA officials and the School Committee reached a tentative agreement at 5:30 p.m. Sunday evening. Before teachers could read, let alone vote on, the tentative agreement, Mayor Galvin and WTA officials declared an end to the strike and the resumption of classes on Monday. "We are excited to return to the classroom tomorrow with our students!" the union wrote in a Twitter statement.

The union announced that teachers would vote on the deal late Sunday evening, giving them no time to seriously study or discuss the details of the four-year agreement. As of this writing, no results of the voting have been made public.

The WTA accepted a deal, which does nothing to protect educators from the impact of inflation, overcrowded classrooms and underfunded programs. Mayor Galvin boasted that the agreement is virtually the same as district officials offered before the strike.

According to NBC10 Boston's Kirsten Glavin, the WTA agreed to a 4-year deal, with a 13.75 percent salary increase, and an extra 10 minutes added to their workday. Teachers had previously rejected a 10 percent three-year offer by 99 percent.

Officials from the WTA, which is affiliated with the National Education Association, never wanted to call a strike in the first place. They reluctantly called the walkout after teachers overwhelmingly rejected two deals WTA officials reached with the district and the mayor in

November and December. On January 27, teachers by 99 percent voted to strike, despite the state's antidemocratic laws that prohibit strikes by public employees.

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

Striking teachers won strong support from Woburn residents, both parents and students, despite their vilification by the School Committee and mayor and injunctions and fines ordered by the courts.

On the Saturday following the vote, as teachers rallied in downtown Woburn, the School Committee announced that the Commonwealth Employment Relations Board had issued a ruling the previous evening mandating the union to cease strike-related activities and resume negotiations.

Massachusetts' anti-strike laws were introduced in the aftermath of the 1919 Boston police strike and were part of the first "Red Scare," in which strikes were labeled as "Bolshevik-inspired" and strikers denounced as "agents of Lenin." Over 100 years later, this reactionary legislation continues to be used in an effort to suppress strikes by teachers and other public sector workers in the state.

Teachers unions in at least two other districts have been fined under the anti-strike legislation. In Haverhill, where teachers engaged in a four-day strike in October 2022, the Haverhill Educators Association (HEA) was fined and paid \$360,000 for a four-day strike. HEA President Tim Briggs said the union is being asked to pay an additional \$500,000 in damages to the city.

In Woburn, the mayor is seeking \$250,000 in reimbursements toward city costs incurred during the strike. Galvin said these costs include police details, school lunches and presenters for a professional development day canceled due to the strike.

The fees demanded by Galvin are on top of fines imposed on the WTA of \$40,000, with \$5,000 levied for each day the strike continued after an injunction imposed last Wednesday. WTA President Barbara Locke said the Woburn teachers union has gone into debt to pay \$85,000 in fines since the strike began.

In fact, workers should insist that not a penny of their dues money be handed over to the state for exercising their democratic right to strike. Far from opposing the government strikebreaking by the Democratic Party-dominated political establishment, however, the teachers unions have pledged to pay the draconian fines.

Following the breakdown of talks on Friday, February 3, both the WTA and the School Committee said they were in agreement on all but the return-to-work order.

A “Resolution and Return to Work” document, dated February 4, was posted on the WTA’s Twitter account. While giving no details on the contents of the tentative agreement, the document set out the terms of a return to work, including an agreement to “reimburse the Committee for any expenses or damages” incurred as a result of the strike. The WTA has pledged an initial payment of \$40,000 to the committee by July 1, together with a number of charitable donations, bringing the total to \$80,000. The document states, “The WTA hereby agrees to reimburse the Committee for any expenses or damages” incurred as a result of the strike.

On Sunday, the WTA agreed to pay a total of \$225,000 over four years to reimburse the city, with an additional payment of \$20,000 to local charities.

In a news conference Saturday, Galvin had said that the reimbursement demand was the sole outstanding issue. Galvin targeted the MTA, which he falsely accused of encouraging the district’s educators to strike, calling on the statewide labor organization to reimburse the city from the “\$49 million in their bank account.”

In fact, the MTA, the state parent organization of the WTA, has done nothing to unify the struggles of educators for decent contracts, a living wage and safe schools. There are currently dozens of school districts throughout Massachusetts with expired contracts, including Amherst, Weymouth, Quincy and Worcester. The contract for Cambridge teachers will expire in August.

Comments on a previous WSWS article on the Woburn strike posted at r/boston on reddit.com give some indication of this. “This is going on everywhere, even in the affluent towns. Lexington has been without a contract since last year and it’s starting to get nasty with teachers

demonstrating before/after school and the Superintendent sending letters to parents throwing the teachers under the bus,” wrote one poster.

“Watertown is heating up too. Without a contract since September,” wrote another. Another commented, “Yep happening in Quincy too, not that it’s affluent, but sorta on par with Woburn.”

Another wrote: “Almost all city and state negotiators know they can delay as long as they want and haven’t been shy about forcing us to work on continuations of expired contracts because we can’t strike. State Higher Ed has been in continuous negotiations since 2008. It would make more sense to allow us to strike when our contract expires but not while we are under contract.”

As has been shown in Woburn and other strikes, anti-strike legislation has not prevented workers from walking out to press their demands. When educators do strike, as in Haverhill and Malden last year and now in Woburn, the unions have agreed to below-inflation pay raises—a pay cut in real terms—and have not addressed other concerns raised by workers.

The experience in Woburn, as in Malden and Haverhill before it, has shown that if teachers are to win their demands, the fight must be taken out of the hands of the unions. The way forward is through the formation of rank-and-file committees to transfer decision-making power from the union bureaucrats to the educators themselves. At the same time, educators must unite with broader sections of the working class, including nurses, railroad and manufacturing workers, to defeat the anti-strike laws and austerity measures being imposed by both big-business parties.



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