

Union says district's provocative 2 percent wage offer is not "sticking point"

Youngstown, Ohio teachers strike over contract demands

Samuel Davidson
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Youngstown teachers took to the picket lines Wednesday morning on what would have been the first day of school for 4,500 students demanding a fair contract.

On Monday teachers voted overwhelmingly to go on strike after the Youngstown City School District rejected the union's demands for changes to contract language that would give teachers more say in students' education as well as increased rights in their own career development.

According to a report late Wednesday afternoon by the Youngstown Education Association (YEA), at Volney Rogers school "while peacefully demonstrating, a YEA teacher was hit by a YCSD administrator driving their car, and was dragged along the sidewalk." The YEA says it is investigating.

The school district has offered the teachers a measly 2 percent pay raise each year over the length of the contract. In a statement District Superintendent Jeremy Batchelor said that the teachers are seeking a 5.25 percent raise.

While not saying what it is seeking, the YEA has said that the claim of 5.25 percent is false, and has gone so far as to file an unfair labor practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board.

Youngstown Education Association spokesperson Jim Courim said that contract language, not wages is what is keeping the union and district apart. "That's really our main sticking point. I know that the district has said wages, but that's not it for us this time," Courim said at the meeting, implicitly signaling acceptance of the district's provocative 2 percent wage offer.

In an interview conducted by Idea Stream Public Media, Courim reiterated the point. Teachers are not feeling heard by the administration, Courim told Idea Stream

Public Media. 'We would like to have a voice in the interventions that our students receive because we're with our students every day, and we know best how they learn,' he said. 'Unfortunately, our voices are not taken into consideration when discussing the extra math or English help that they receive, (or) the extra literacy help that they receive.'

The School District has made clear that they will not give in to teachers' demands and are seeking to break the strike.

District Superintendent Jeremy Batchelor said that the contract language on placement, promotions and transfers were the same as neighboring districts.

"And we've even offered language that is consistent with some of our neighboring districts that [are] higher performing than us," Batchelor said.

On Tuesday afternoon, the day before the walkout, over 250 teachers and as many parents attended a Board of Education meeting in the hopes that the school board would instruct the district to meet teachers' demands. Prior to the meeting union officials stated that they would be prepared to negotiate before or after the board meeting.

However, as soon as the meeting started school board members voted to go into executive session and retreated to a private room. When board members returned from their executive session, they made it perfectly clear that they were going to back the district's hardline stance and that their task that day was to organize the running of school without the teachers in the event of a strike.

As reported by WKBY TV, several parents spoke at the meeting including Katie Wilson, who said that her children would not be participating in remote learning. "My children will not be crossing the picket lines," Katie said.

LaVertta Cooks-Shase appealed to the board to back the teachers, “let’s do what’s right and give these teachers what they deserve and what they are asking for,” LaVertta said.

The Youngstown City School District had originally planned to begin remote learning Wednesday morning, that has now been pushed back and is not set to start until Friday.

Batchelor is claiming that the Youngstown Education Association (YEA), which represents the 450 striking teachers, have broken the law by calling the strike without first submitting themselves to a fact finding process.

Ohio, like most states, has a series of laws limiting the right of teachers, government service workers and health care providers to strike.

The Ohio State Employment Relations Board is expected to rule within three days on the legality of the teachers strike.

Educators, like all workers have seen their living standards rapidly declining over the past three years as inflation has been running rampant. Even if teachers were granted a 5 percent pay raise, which the union has made clear it is not seeking, it would not be enough to make up for their declining purchasing power over the past three years. The 2 percent increase being offered by the Youngstown City School District amounts to a massive pay cut.

Teachers generally are one of the lowest paid professions and teachers in Youngstown are among the lowest paid in the region. Last year a starting teacher with a bachelor’s degree earned just above \$35,000 a year. A teacher with a master’s degree made slightly more than \$38,000. It would take a teacher with a bachelor’s degree 15 years and the teacher with the master’s degree 12 years before they would earn the median income for Ohio, a little over \$61,000 a year.

The Ohio Education Association, of which the Youngstown Education Association is a part, has a long history of isolating the struggles of teachers. While teachers everywhere are facing the same problems: overcrowded classroom; cuts to art, music and other programs; old and outdated books; lack of resources; old and dilapidated buildings; and low wages—the NEA has never fought for national standards and worked to keep each struggle of educators isolated.

Last year teachers in Columbus, who had also gone on strike primarily over safety conditions for their students and conditions in their dilapidated buildings, were sent back to work after a contract was reached that didn’t

fundamentally address their concerns, offering only vague and never fulfilled promises that the schools would be updated.

Throughout the pandemic the National Education Association and the other major teachers union, the American Federation of Teachers, collaborated with first the Trump and then the Biden administration to reopen schools at all costs in the midst of a continuing pandemic.

The Warren-Youngstown area is one of the poorest communities in Ohio, still suffering from the massive deindustrialization that took place during the 1980s and 1990s when the steel mills and electronics plants shut down and tens of thousands of people put out of work.

According to US census data more than 35 percent the population of Youngstown lives below the miserably low official poverty line. The medium household income is just \$31,020, half the statewide average of \$61,938. And fewer than 52 percent of adults above the age 16 are in the labor market.

The Biden administration has no plans for increasing funding for public education. Late last year, in a deal to avert a government shutdown, the Biden administration agreed to severe cuts to social programs.

This year the Republican majority in Congress has already made clear that they will seek even deeper cuts to social spending. Biden and the Democrats in the Congress and Senate, after some hoopla and public relations stunts, agreed to deep cuts. At the same time Biden continues the funding of the NATO instigated and backed war of Ukraine against Russia, providing billions each month and the pledge of more to come.



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