

Teachers in Evergreen and Camas school districts set to strike as public education budget is slashed across Washington state

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Over two thousand teachers in southwest Washington state are set to strike this week as schools open. This is taking place as district budgets are being slashed across the state under conditions where the bipartisan budget deal reached by Congress in May will enormously exacerbate cuts to public education across the US.

Around 450 teachers in Camas School District already began their strike on Monday, after the Camas Education Association and district officials failed to come to an agreement. In Evergreen School District, located in Vancouver, another 1,650 teachers are preparing to strike on Wednesday. Educators in these districts voted to authorize strikes in the preceding weeks. In Battle Ground School District, teachers are set to go back to school on Wednesday without a contract, since the union never called a strike authorization vote.

Camas and Evergreen teachers are striking against inadequate pay, large class sizes, and lack of support for special education. Moreover, teachers have cited the immense shortage of substitute teachers, who earn starvation wages. Teachers and staff have also been vocal in their demands for music and school libraries to receive a fair amount of resources.

Camas teachers were offered a 4.9 percent raise by the district for the coming year, according to Oregon Public Broadcasting. However, last year saw inflation soar to at average rate of 8.52 percent. This amounts to a dramatic pay cut for Camas teachers. Evergreen Public Schools has offered an equally inadequate 4.7 percent pay increase. These effective wage cuts are being proposed after 50 staff members, including 37 teachers, have been laid off from Camas School District this year

due to budget shortfalls.

Washington state public education workers are facing an immense budget crisis this coming school year. Numerous teachers across Washington were paid using the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). The loss of this temporary source of funding has thrown districts into crisis.

Seattle Public Schools will be contending with a \$131 million deficit in the 2023-24 school year. In response, the central office is cutting its budget by \$33 million. The budget for school staff will be reduced by \$11.2 million. The district is anticipating that it will have to cut the Washington Middle School Band program. Of the district's 106 schools, 30 with less than 300 students will likely be closed.

Shoreline School District cut \$9.1 million from its budget, leading to 70 employees losing their jobs. Bellevue School District will close two schools in response to its \$31 million deficit. Spokane, located in eastern Washington, saw 90 Central Valley High School teachers lose their jobs. There are many other districts across the Pacific Northwest that are in the midst of a budget crisis and will be cutting programs and jobs. The education budget crisis shaking Washington state is reflected by the regional and national situation.

The bipartisan budget ceiling agreement reached in May established that non-military spending in 2024 cannot exceed the present 2023 levels. Public education will receive no increase in funding from the federal government. ESSER funds that have not been spent by the school districts will be rescinded by September 2024. At the same time the budget ceiling agreement ensured that the military has no spending cap.

The statewide and national character of the crisis in public education funding demonstrates that educators cannot conduct their struggle on the basis of local, district-by-district negotiations. Rather, rank-and-file teachers and staff must unite across districts to fight for full funding, restoration of cut positions, wage increases for all staff, and smaller class sizes.

The call for a united fight necessarily pits teachers against the Washington Education Association (WEA) bureaucrats, who have shown their role as strikebreakers in critical struggles over the last five years. From the statewide “McCleary strikes” in 2018 to last year’s strike wave, the WEA locals sought to divide workers by district, prevent strikes where ever possible, and where not possible, end strikes quickly without meeting teachers’ demands.

Last year, teachers and staff in Seattle, Kent, Tumwater and Eatonville all voted overwhelmingly to strike at the start of school. The regional unions, affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA), kept the strikes completely isolated. Teachers and staff were not informed by the unions of the strikes taking place across the Pacific Northwest region. In each of these struggles, the NEA bureaucracy called for snap votes, and left problems such as wages, understaffing and class sizes wholly unresolved.

The conduct of the Seattle Education Association (SEA) bureaucracy last year demonstrated its inability to defend the interests of teachers and staff. The union officials shut down last year’s strike on September 14, and sent teachers back into their classrooms before the vote to ratify the new contract. The teachers were not able to review the contents of the whole contract before the vote.

Union officials even defied a resolution, ratified by the rank-and-file, to remain on strike until the resolution was ratified. Instead of respecting the will of the rank-and-file, the SEA bureaucracy pressured workers to vote to suspend their strike before a contract was ratified.

Furthermore, these experiences have demonstrated the bipartisan character of the attacks on public education and the hostility toward teachers. Whether in Democratic or Republican led districts, educators confront the same basic issues. Democratic Governor Jay Inslee has overseen these attacks since he was first elected in 2013, simultaneously dishing out tax cuts to

billionaires and major corporations like Amazon, Facebook and Boeing. While military spending soars to new heights every year, schools and public services are starved.

The needs of working class young people, and the struggle for the future of education, can not be left in the hands of an organization that has conspired with the Democratic Party, behind the backs of educators, to implement sweeping social austerity. The NEA has not, and will not, mobilize its over 3 million members against budget cuts and the vicious attacks on the democratic rights of teachers from the Republican Party. Instead, president of the NEA Becky Pringle vocally endorsed president Joe Biden in April, stating that his administration is “the most pro-public education and pro-union administration in modern history.” Pringle’s statements of support underscore her concern; the preservation of the immense salaries and benefits of union bureaucrats rather than the decades long assault on educator’s living standards.

Evergreen and Camas teachers must form rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by educators themselves, to prevent their struggle from being sold out. Teachers must organize independently from the union bureaucracies in order to unify the broadest sections of teachers in the struggles that are imminent. Education workers as well must defend themselves from poverty and attacks on their democratic rights by controlling their own struggle through the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-management education unions.



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