

Evergreen teachers in Washington state continue strike as Camas Education Association in splitting move rams through agreement on short notice

David Fitzgerald
7 September 2023

Evergreen Public Schools teachers have entered their second week on strike, meanwhile, at the Camas School District, the Camas Education Association (CEA) ratified a sellout contract on Thursday afternoon. The districts serve an estimated 30,000 students in adjacent towns in the southern region of Washington state, just north of Portland, Oregon.

In both districts, school officials have adopted an intransigent position while the teacher unions have sought to isolate the strikes while keeping educators in the dark about the content of the negotiations.

The CEA left teachers with practically no time to carefully review the contents of the tentative agreement (which was reached late Wednesday night) before holding the ratification vote on Thursday at 3:30 p.m.

In a brief summary released on Thursday afternoon, CEA officials stated that teachers will receive a 6.4 percent wage increase this year and a 6.6 percent increase next year. Class sizes for Kindergarten will be capped down to 22 kids from 24 the prior year, and all other elementary school classes will be capped at 24 students each.

The over 2,000 teachers involved in these struggles are making demands that are essential for the well-being of students and the continued functioning of public education. On social media, in open and live online meetings with WEA bureaucrats and in communication with local news, teachers have stressed the importance of reducing class sizes and caseloads. Moreover, the salary offered by both districts amounted to a significant pay cut for teachers when considering rampant inflation.

Teachers are also demanding more resources for physical education, music and library programs since these programs have consistently been underfunded. A number of teachers at both districts have commented on major issue of ongoing understaffing and overwork, especially regarding special education.

The vagueness of the bargaining objectives advanced publicly by both the Camas Education Association (CEA) and the Evergreen Education Association (EEA) committed the unions to nothing. The Camas union bureaucracy asserts in its Tentative Agreements Completed section that they will be “raising substitute pay,”

“clarifying teacher obligations for before/after school supervision of students,” and “providing greater consistency for teachers around workday start/end times.” There is no indication that the contract ratified by the CEA contains language that commits the district to anything specific, outside of meager pay increases.

These struggles take place amidst a deepening crisis in public education. Driven by the economic fallout from the pandemic, decline in enrollment and the drying up of federal COVID relief funds, innumerable districts across Washington state are facing budget deficits in the tens of millions, or in the case of the largest districts, deficits of over \$100 million. The eruption of strikes by teachers in Youngstown, Ohio and school bus drivers in Liberty Township, Ohio demonstrate that similar conditions are widespread in other areas of the US.

Internationally, Polish as well as UK teachers are contending with public school systems on the brink of collapse as they face mass staffing shortages and crumbling infrastructure. Teachers in Hungary have held protests and strikes, and several teachers were fired for defying draconian minimum service requirements imposed on the strikes. Portuguese teachers launched a nationwide strike earlier this year and have participated in ongoing protests.

While the Camas and Evergreen Education Associations have made some of their demands public, a number of teachers and parents have expressed anxiety on social media over being kept in the dark regarding the progress of negotiations. The bargaining progress reports are buried within the websites of both districts. The updated reports have not been consistently announced on social media by either union. The contents of the Camas teacher’s ratified agreement have not been made public.

The unions’ deliberate lack of communication with parents and its own teacher-members has had a double effect; first, parents and teachers are pitted against one another, and second, the unions are able to conceal the fact that they are preparing to accept deep concessions. The speedy ramming through of the tentative agreement by the CEA has proven this correct.

The CEA’s proposed reduction of class sizes is inadequate to meet the needs of students. Grades 9-12 will see class sizes lowered only to 30. Grades 6 through 12 will have classrooms of

around 30 students. Rather than address the systemic issue of inordinately large classroom sizes, the CEA promises to “increase ‘outlier’ pay for extra-large classes.” The district has calculated that this “outlier pay” will cost far less than hiring desperately needed teachers. Further, the district’s budget deficit of \$5-7 million is not mentioned in the bargaining progress reports. There has been no suggestion that the ratified contract contains anything different on these issues from what is in the bargaining progress report.

The EEA has proposed that the caseload of school psychologists be “reduced to 1:1,000,” inevitably leaving innumerable students without mental health care and academic support. There is no mention of the crisis caused by the lack of substitute teachers. Instead, the EEA states that “the District proposed to hire eleven roving teachers to provide release time for elementary general education and special education teachers during the workday. These eleven certificated roving teachers will also assist in covering unfilled positions K-12 when needed.”

The issue of large classroom sizes is also sidestepped. The district believes it will be cheaper to “increase overload pay by 40 percent beginning in 2023-24” rather than decrease classroom sizes. The proposed pay increase of 6 percent for first year teachers is still significantly less than last year’s average inflation rate of 8.3 percent. The expiration of \$8.7 million in ESSER funds is not an issue that is addressed in the bargaining progress report.

A careful review of the bargaining progress reports makes clear that none of the most serious problems faced by teachers are being addressed. Teachers are to receive a slight pay increase that does not keep up with the cost of living in one of the most expensive states in the US. The issues of classroom sizes, understaffing, lack of substitute teachers, support for special education, lack of nurses, counselors and psychologists are papered over by the unions and school officials.

Perhaps most concerning is the complete absence of any discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic by either the unions or the district. The US is currently in the middle of another wave of mass infections. Clark County, Washington, where both striking districts are located, show a major spike of 61 percent in COVID-19 wastewater levels throughout the month of August. There is no doubt that the reopening of schools will contribute to further spread.

The Washington Education Association (WEA) held a live online meeting with Camas rank-and-file teachers on August 31. Despite the meeting being hosted by the WEA’s finance research analyst, Marie Cañas, nothing was mentioned regarding the financial crisis facing schools across Washington. Cañas focused solely on the local district, and painted the financial situation in the rosiest possible terms. She made sure not to remind teachers of the recent layoffs of 50 staff members including 37 teachers and the ongoing estimated \$7 million budget deficit for the upcoming school year. Her task was to chloroform the teachers by pretending the economic situation favored an easy victory for the Camas teachers. In reality, school districts are slashing budgets across the US.

As the Evergreen strike continues, teachers are entering into direct confrontation with the union bureaucracy and the state who

are seeking to put an end to the strike as soon as possible. The Camas School District School Board voted on August 29 to approve a resolution calling for legal action to end the “illegal” strike. The resolution authorizes the district’s law firm to take legal steps toward terminating the strike and raising fines against the striking teachers and the union. The CEA was both unwilling and incapable of confronting this challenge from the district. Instead, they collaborated with their district colleagues to wrap up the strike as quickly as possible.

The EEA has done everything possible to isolate teachers on the picket line. Neither organization mentioned the possibility of unifying these struggles, let alone expanding them to other districts across the state that face similar crises. Teachers in another neighboring district, Battle Ground Public Schools, were forced back into classrooms without a contract at the start of the school year, despite the desire of teachers to join striking teachers in Camas and Evergreen.

The recent teacher strikes in Washington last year present a stark warning for teachers currently on strike in the state. Despite simultaneous teacher strikes in Seattle, Kent, and other districts last summer, the WEA worked systematically to isolate teachers to their respective districts and locked teachers into contracts that only exacerbated the problems they faced.

A struggle for the right of students to an education, and the struggle for public education in general, requires a different perspective and strategy. The ruling class is diverting hundreds of billions into the US-NATO war taking place in Ukraine. The military budget stands at \$1 trillion, without a spending cap. The ruling class is prioritizing the drive to war far above public education.

There is more than enough wealth generated by workers to cover the cost of the highest quality public education. In Washington State alone, 13 billionaires possess a total wealth of over \$350 billion, far exceeding the \$37.46 billion public schools in Washington received from state, local and federal sources.

The sell out of the teachers by the Camas Education Association must serve as a warning to the Evergreen teachers who are still on the picket lines. The trade union bureaucracies intend to hold snap votes to ram through sellout contracts.

Evergreen teachers must take their struggle into their own hands. The WEA and its affiliates cannot be allowed to force through sellout contracts which fail to meet teachers demands. Teachers must organize throughout the region in a combined struggle. This can only be done through the formation of rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by the teachers themselves. These committees will serve as a means of discussing and communicating teachers demands and reaching out to mobilize the widest fight possible.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact