

Oregon teachers authorize strike, face isolation from union bureaucracy

David Fitzgerald
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On October 20, the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) announced a strike starting November 1, in response to mounting opposition among rank-and-file teachers in the largest school district in the state of Oregon. The announcement came after 93 percent of approximately 700 Portland Public School (PPS) teachers voted by 98.9 percent to authorize a strike action Thursday. Teachers have been working under an expired contract since June, and are demanding pay increases to keep up with inflation, smaller class sizes, and more resources.

PPS teachers and school workers are facing drastic cuts to staff and school programs as district revenues continue to drop for the foreseeable future. A report by KOIN news revealed that, even if PPS teachers win none of their demands, the district projects a \$10 million deficit in 2023-24, a \$15 million deficit in 2024-25 and a \$20 million deficit in 2025-26. The district announced in April that it planned to cut 90 staff.

The strike authorization vote for PPS teachers comes after Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) reached an impasse with PPS last month. The last offer proposed by the district to Portland teachers included a measly 4 percent pay increase, no reduction of class sizes and no increased planning time for teachers. The district refuses to utilize its \$100 million reserve fund to meet any of the teacher's modest demands.

In response, PAT is proposing a 23 percent wage increase spread out over 3 years, which means an average annual increase of 7.6 percent. Even this is inadequate considering the enormous rate of inflation, the highest since the 1980s. The union has also proposed establishing a cap to classroom sizes, the specifics of which have not been disclosed, and that the district take action for affordable housing, including offering subsidized housing for families in poverty and lobbying for new policies.

Classified staff in the district rejected a contract that was accepted by the Portland Federation of School Professionals-AFT Local 111 (PFSP) bureaucracy in late September. These 1,350 teaching assistants, family service workers, administrative assistants, library assistants, physical therapists, and other staff were given a contract that offered a minimum of \$20 an hour, despite 98 percent of the membership already earning slightly above this rate.

At the time the tentative agreement was reached, union president John MacDuffee praised the district, stating "we applaud the Portland Public Schools' Board of Education for responding to our members' pleas by attempting to address the financial hardships

endured by employees in this high cost of living city."

The final segment of PPS employees aiming to strike include 600 school workers in the district including cafeteria workers, custodians and nutrition service workers within Portland SEIU 503 Local 140, who have also been working without a contract since June. One cafeteria worker informed KGW8 News that most workers make less than \$24,000 annually working for PPS, with many holding multiple jobs just to make ends meet. SEIU 503 Local 140 is demanding a 30-45 percent cost of living increase, which was immediately rejected by the district.

Hundreds of Portland Association of Teachers, SEIU Local 503 and Portland Federation of School Professionals members marched on Tuesday night in protest of low pay in one of the most expensive areas in the US. Unmanageable class sizes and inadequate planning time for instruction have remained major issues for years and were central issues during the protest.

Across social media, parents and teachers have highlighted the fact that PPS has slashed teacher and staff positions over the last three years. One parent pointed out on Reddit that PPS "refuses to bargain over class sizes and temperatures - over 33 kids in some classrooms, 90+ degree classrooms, mold growing on ceilings - our kids and our educators deserve a strong contract and I 100% support teachers in this fight." The support for teachers and other school workers among parents, and workers more broadly, is overwhelming.

The broader context of class struggle

These untenable working conditions and attacks on public education are being felt throughout districts across Oregon and United States. \$122.7 billion in federal ESSER III Funds are nearing total depletion in the coming school year, threatening an estimated 250,000 educator positions and major cuts to Title 1 funding. This looms on top of a crippling and ongoing staffing crisis throughout the US.

Another 2,300 teachers in neighboring Salem-Keizer Public schools, the second largest district in the state serving 42,237 students, recently pressed for strike action. But Salem-Keizer Public Schools announced on September 26 that they were

bringing in a state mediator to prevent a strike in collaboration with the Salem-Keizer Education Association. Salem-Keizer superintendent Andrea Castañeda voiced her confidence that the SKEA would prevent a strike in partnership with the district, stating “we all [the district and union] want the same things.”

Despite demands by teachers and families for better working conditions and more staff, Castañeda further reiterated that teachers and students will face cuts to overcome a \$50 million budget shortfall. “Every dollar we add to our budget is a dollar we will need to cut over the coming months.” A strike vote date has not been announced by the union.

Other ongoing struggles by school workers include:

- Over 18,000 teachers in Clark County, Nevada resisting state anti-strike laws;
- 3,548 teachers in Fresno who are set to vote to strike on October 18;
- 2,547 teachers who voted by 97 percent to strike in San Francisco;
- 54,000 school bus drivers in New York are currently voting on a sellout TA;
- San Antonio, Texas parents and community members who recently flooded a school board meeting over the closing of 19 elementary schools.

School workers across the US are fighting back in the face of the bipartisan assault on public education and working conditions. Smaller districts across the US, such as in Massachusetts, Louisiana and Ohio, teachers are insisting upon a strike.

US teachers are clamoring to strike in the context of an explosion in the class struggle more broadly among workers across industries who are all fighting against exploitation, low wages and gross overwork. The strike held this month by 85,000 Kaiser Permanente workers, which included Portland Kaiser workers, was the largest healthcare strike in US history. This historic upsurge of workers was abruptly ended after only 9 days by the The Coalition for Kaiser Permanente Unions, which recently announced a sellout agreement.

Auto workers are engaged in a titanic struggle as UAW members strive to break through the union bureaucracy’s impotent “stand up strike” policy. Workers at Mack Trucks, the Stellantis Toledo Jeep Complex, the Dana Driveline plant, and other big three plants are fighting to broaden their struggle against the firing of masses of workers in the wake of electric vehicles.

But workers are not only fighting management, but also the isolation and suppression of their struggles by the pro-corporate trade union bureaucrats. In Portland, the union bureaucracies have made no attempt to threaten joint action, but instead have placed workers on separate voting schedules, aiming to prevent the struggles from coalescing.

This follows the history of Portland educators’ unions sabotaging workers struggles. In 2003, SEIU 503 Local 140 allowed 300 custodians to be relocated out of the district to work under Local 49, with an enormous cut in pay. Local 140 did nothing to protest this move, let alone organize a strike. Portland teachers faced an unprecedented attack on their jobs and work rights in 2013. The contract, which was forced through after months of secret negotiations, included granting management

rights “without limitation.” By averting a strike at the eleventh hour, the PAT maintained its record of having never gone on strike in the entirety of its history.

The way forward: Fight for a unified strike! Build rank-and-file committees!

Portland education workers are clearly ready to fight against decades of budget cuts, deteriorating conditions and rising cost-of-living. They are in a powerful position to unify their struggles into a common fight, including a joint strike, for the district to meet all of their demands.

However, the leadership of this struggle must not be left in the hands of the union bureaucracies, who will do everything they can to limit job actions and ensure the rapid passage of tentative agreements that will not meet workers’ key demands.

In order to unify workers and take democratic control over the direction of negotiations and strike action, education workers must organize rank-and-file committees independently of the trade unions. Workers must fight for what is desperately needed to serve students and support workers’ lives, rejecting what the district claims is possible.

There is plenty of money to meet social needs, but it is presently hoarded by the ruling stratum of society. The entire political establishment will dish out hundreds of billions for bailouts of the rich and war in Ukraine and Palestine, but nothing for workers, social services and public education. The working class can and must fight to redirect these vast resources to meet their needs.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will offer its support to workers in building rank-and-file committees and organizing a powerful struggle to win their demands. Those who agree can contact us today to share your thoughts and get involved!



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