Educators in Portland, Oregon begin strike for higher pay, staffing and support

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We encourage Portland educators and workers to contact us to share your thoughts on the ongoing strike, conditions at your school and setting up rank-and-file strike committees.

Around 3,700 teachers, school psychologists and other certified staff began an indefinite strike on Wednesday in Portland, Oregon. This is the first strike in Portland Public Schools' (PPS) history, which is the largest district in the state with 45,000 students.

Educators are fighting for pay increases to keep up with inflation, reduced class sizes, additional lesson planning time and increased staffing to meet the heightened social, emotional and academic needs of students.

Portland's strike comes amidst an intensification of the class struggle across the United States, including educators across the West Coast, Kaiser healthcare workers, Big Three autoworkers and Hollywood writers and actors.

On Wednesday morning, reporters with the WSWS visited the picket lines at Franklin High School and Atkinson Elementary School in southeast Portland.

While generally having a good experience with students and administration at Franklin, one art teacher named Srule said, "I do have difficulty with the top-heavy administration at the main office. They could lose a few administrators and put that money into other things."

He continued, "Teacher salaries need to be increased. Young teachers can't afford to live here. That's ridiculous. People want to buy a house, they can't do that. We need the raises, we need to reduce class sizes, and we need more time to prepare, which is one of the things we're working toward. Those are the three major elements. And of course, the district is fighting against that."

"That's the thing, there's money for war, money for tax cuts," he said, but no money for education, according to the district. When asked whether he would support a united strike across the US, he replied, "One hundred percent. We have to do what they do in Europe, having strikes across multiple countries or even just one country, we need to do that."

The average rent in Portland is $1,763, while the median salary for a first-year teacher in Portland is about $58,000, according to job listing website Indeed. The salary goes up to $77,000 only after 10 years. In other words, more than a third of a new teachers' before-tax income is used just to keep a roof over their heads. And for those who make less than the median, by definition half, the struggle to stay afloat is far harder.

Elizabeth, a Kindergarten teacher and the site's media representative, said, "Right now, our key demands are that we want to make sure that our schools provide what our students deserve. They deserve safety in the classroom and the school in general—free of pest droppings, free of mold, safe from violence. Our students are coming in with more social and emotional needs, and they need to be supported.

"Students come in with high needs. That means some kids are talented and gifted, and then you have kids coming from trauma or they don't have enough food to eat. Those kids need additional support as well. So you have a very broad spectrum, and in order for teachers to meet the needs of all of our students and give them enough of what they deserve in the classroom, we need planning time."

The PAT bargaining committee has been in negotiations with Portland Public Schools (PPS) since June when the last 3-year contract expired, and members have been working without a contract since that time.

In the most recent series of negotiations, PPS held to its offer of a measly 4.5 percent raise in the first year and 3 percent in next two years of the contract. PAT has raised demands for an 8.5 percent increase in the first year, 6 percent in the second year, and 5 percent in the final year.

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However, both offers fall well below what teachers have lost to inflation since 2020.

The last 3-year contract also contained “soft caps” on class sizes, with educators only getting paid additional amounts if they are teaching classes beyond the class size goal. PAT is now demanding “hard caps” with requirements for the district to stay within certain limits, although the exact numbers have not been released.

There has also been no discussion of protections against the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Thousands of teachers have died as a direct result of the virus and tens of thousands more have acquired debilitating cases of Long COVID.

There are ample ways to protect against the virus, including masks, air filtration, far UV lighting, as well as lockdowns of schools and non-essential businesses to stem the spread of the deadly disease, but these measures are ignored and the virus allowed to run rampant among students, parents and staff.

For decades, public education has been under attack from all levels of government, by both the Democratic and Republican parties. The perennial claim is that there is “no money” for high quality public education and other public services, thus why teachers have to take effective pay cuts in both their actual salary and the supplies they need to provide for students out of pocket.

The reality is that both parties of big business are more focused on funding wars abroad, including targeting schools and children. The budget for the Department of Education requested by President Biden for Fiscal Year 2024 was $90 billion. But for the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the Israeli invasion of Gaza, Biden quickly called for and received $105 billion. In Gaza this includes billions of dollars for the Israeli military that has so far killed more than 3,000 children in its genocidal campaign against the Palestinians.

The assault on wages and living conditions is intimately connected with the warmongering by capitalist governments around the world. The same profit motive that drives cost cutting for public education also drives wars that bomb schools and hospitals and kill thousands of children. Teachers must mobilize not just on the basis of their current contract struggle, but politically to end the social order that engenders such assaults on public education in the first place.

Such a struggle cannot be carried out by appealing to the union leadership, district administration or state politicians, who are doing everything in their power to keep workers isolated and on the job.

For its part, the PAT union apparatus has done nothing to mobilize a broader struggle with the other paraprofessionals and school workers who are still without a contract, let alone with educators across the state or country. They claim that a major victory can be won simply by bargaining in good faith with the district, despite the district’s unwavering opposition to PAT’s demands.

The bureaucrats which run the teachers’ unions have sabotaged every strike that educators have waged over the last decade, including PAT in the 2013 contract struggle. Portland teachers must be warned that the PAT bureaucracy will try to push through a sellout agreement to end the current strike without meeting crucial needs and demands.

Official NEA labor organizers were flown to Portland over the weekend to assist with reaching a contract prior to Wednesday’s strike. Seeking to suppress the clear opposition among educators and students to untenable conditions in PPS, National Education Association president Becky Pringle made an appearance at the picket lines Wednesday to ensure the local union pushes through a deal to wrap up the strike as soon as possible.

Pringle, head of the largest teacher union in the US with 3 million members, who rakes in an annual salary of $500,000, has not the teachers’ interests but the interests of the Democratic party and the state in mind. Her appearance gives every indication that the NEA and its local affiliate, the PAT, is doing everything to try to keep the strike of nearly 4,000 teachers within their grip and isolated from not only the other school workers in PPS, but also from teachers in other districts and workers in other industries from uniting.

In order to carry forward their fight and prevent a sellout, Portland teachers can and should set up independent rank-and-file strike committees at every school site. These committees will serve as democratic organs for educators and staff to organize appeals for a unified strike with all PPS workers, as well as other sections of the working class in the area. They can also be the forum in which educators oversee negotiations and decide for themselves when their strike is over, rather than be sent back to school before voting on a TA.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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