

As the teachers' strike in Oregon approaches its third week

Portland teachers union prepares sellout of citywide strike

David Fitzgerald
20 November 2023

Over 3,700 Portland, Oregon, teachers, school psychologists and other certified staff for the Portland Public Schools (PPS) are now entering their third week on an indefinite strike. The strike is the first in the history of the district, which covers 45,000 students and is the largest in the state.

As the strike has progressed, the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) has refused to call for further action by broader sections of the working class to support the teachers and has instead made concession after concession. A warning must be made: None of the teachers' most serious demands are being met by the negotiations, and there is every indication that PAT and PPS are using the holiday break to wrap up the strike and present a sellout contract to the union membership.

Among the most pressing of the concessions is the fact that PAT has withdrawn its request for "hard caps" to reduce class sizes, which would have required the district to hire 350 additional teachers. Instead, the widely-hated "soft caps" will be maintained, with the district providing extra pay to teachers when classrooms or caseloads exceed a specific limit.

This ultimately serves as a cost-cutting measure, keeping the number of teachers the district has to pay as low as possible and dodging the class size issue entirely. The cost of this overage pay is approximately \$2-\$3 million, while the district plans to save about \$100 million by discarding class size and caseload caps.

PAT President Angela Bonnilla announced in a recent press conference that "we have gone down twice since our original proposal," referring to the pay demands of teachers in the expensive Portland metropolitan area. The current proposal by the union is

for an 8.5 percent increase during the first year of the contract, a 5.5 percent increase in the second year and a 5 percent increase in the third year, which only barely makes up for the last three years of inflation, nor does it account for further inflation. Portland already has a cost of living 23 percent higher than the national average.

The offer from PPS currently stands at a cumulative 10.9 percent increase over the next three years: 4.5 percent in the first year, then 3 percent in the second year, and then 3 percent in the third year, which constitutes a poverty proposal.

The district and the teachers union are working with the state's Democratic Party leadership to limit the strike. Before the strike began, Democratic Governor Tina Kotek called on teachers to continue to work during negotiations. She also provided a state financial mediator to give official cover for the claims that there is just no more funding available to allocate to PPS or any other district.

A series of other state Democratic politicians also weighed in, claiming a lack of funds for Portland's educators. Portland Democratic State Senator Elizabeth Steiner expressed her "frustration" last week that educators would consider asking for more money and declared, "I'm not swooping in" to provide the needed funds. Senator Lew Frederick, a Portland Democrat, insisted, "I have to say, not that I know of," in response to a question of whether there were any more sources of money for education. The chair of the Senate Education Committee, Michael Dembrow, insisted, "We can't give money just to PPS, and we're talking here about additional ongoing funding, not just a one-time appropriation."

Such claims are open lies. Just as the district claims

that hiring new teachers would cost \$100 million a year, the Biden administration has provided \$105 billion for the wars in Ukraine, Israel and elsewhere. That money could have instead been split evenly among the states for education, providing enough money for new teachers in Portland twice over. And that is only a drop in the bucket compared to the nearly \$1 trillion spent every year on the US defense budget. There is plenty of money for education; it is squandered by Democrats and Republicans alike on war.

United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shawn Fain and Association of Flight Attendants (CWA, AFL–CIO) President Sara Nelson also intervened to bolster the teachers union bureaucracy. In a video released on November 15, Fain admitted that conditions in public education have consistently and rapidly deteriorated over many years. “We have watched it for years, the decimation of education and our teachers, all the cuts being made.”

The intervention by Fain and Nelson is an indication that the bureaucracy is worried the strike could develop beyond their control. The two figures are among the most prominent “reform” figures in the trade union apparatus; Nelson is a leading member of the Democratic Socialists of America, and Fain was elected president last year with the DSA’s key support. Both were invited to give testimony last week at a Senate hearing chaired by self-described “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders.

In reality, they represent the same bureaucracy with a different coat of paint. Fain, elected on a 9 percent turnout under conditions where hundreds of thousands of workers never received ballots, is currently working to impose concessions contracts on autoworkers using threats, intimidation and likely ballot fraud. Nelson has repeatedly cited her role in securing tens of billions in bailout money for the airline industry as one of her greatest achievements.

Neither Fain nor Nelson acknowledged the fact that the deplorable school conditions they cited were signed off on by the bureaucracy of the teachers unions for years. It is not only that the Portland Public Schools are ruthless cost-cutters at the expense of children’s education, but it is also the PAT officialdom is in the pocket of the school district and has allowed such cuts to go forward essentially unchallenged.

Teachers cannot accept this continual spiral

downward. Numerous teachers, parents and supporters have taken to social media to describe mold and rodents in classrooms. Class sizes are described as overwhelming. A severe lack of planning time is negatively impacting students. The teacher shortage and lack of support staff are being acutely felt.

Portland teachers have arrived at a critical turning point. Strikes among every section of workers are taking place at a far higher rate now than in the past. The struggle of the Portland teachers must be broadened to other teachers, school workers and the working class as a whole. Masses of workers, including teachers, are seeking to fight back against decades of austerity and falling living conditions, as well as the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and expanding wars.

The broadening of the strike, however, will involve a direct conflict with the Democratic Party establishment. It will also involve a confrontation with the union bureaucracy, which is responsible for the isolation of the strike and seeks to wrap it up as quickly as possible.

It is imperative that Portland teachers take the struggle into their own hands. The only way for them to win their demands is to organize independently of the trade union apparatus and to break with the Democratic Party.

Rank-and-file committees of workers must be established to act as genuinely democratic organs through which teachers and educators can discuss their demands and unite with other educators across the state and the country. They will also lift the veil of secrecy over the negotiations and establish real control over the process by teachers. This must be connected with a strategy to unite their struggle with those of teachers and other workers across the world.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact