

# Portland Association of Teachers forces through sellout contract

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A three-week strike by 3,700 teachers, psychologists and certified staff in Portland Public Schools (PPS) in Oregon was called off by the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) on November 26, after the union announced a tentative agreement with the school district. The strike was the first for the district, which covers 45,000 students and is the largest in the state.

The contract was rammed through the following day, before educators had any time to study it. According to the union, 93 percent of teachers voted on the contract, which was ratified with a yes vote of 94.7 percent. The agreement was passed by the school board on November 28.

Throughout the strike, the PAT consistently refused to mobilize other sections of educators or the broader working class in general. Like every other worker in the US and internationally, Portland educators suffer from declining real wages in the face of massive inflation and dangerous workplace environments thanks to the continued uncontrolled spread of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

Teachers everywhere are fighting for the same things as Portland educators. Their demands include smaller class sizes, additional lesson planning time, mold and pest control and more staff to address the urgent social, academic and emotional problems facing today's youth. There would have been no shortage of additional educators and other workers to stand alongside Portland teachers in their fight to be able to better educate the next generation.

Instead, PAT deliberately kept Portland teachers isolated and at the same time kept them in the dark about the actual details of the contract. Teachers were only provided the time granted by a two-hour day on Monday, the day classes resumed, to review and vote on the contract. They were informed that “significant

strides” had been made to achieve their demands.

In reality, the three-year contract is a step backwards. Most significantly is that the pay increase for the duration of the contract will only be 14.4 percent. While it is hailed as the largest increase in the district's history, it falls well short of inflation over the past three years. An article this week in *Bloomberg* documents that it now requires \$119.27 to buy the same commodities as one could with \$100 in January 2020.

The article highlights that rent has gone up 20 percent, groceries have gone up 25 percent, electricity has gone up 25 percent and natural gas has gone up 29 percent. Even water and sewerage have risen beyond the new pay increase, going up by 16 percent. The “significant strides” touted by the union don't even make up for what has been lost by workers over the past three years, much less provide for rising prices over the next three.

PPS has threatened to offset even the meager nominal wage increases through cuts in other areas of district spending. School board member Andrew Scott told Oregon Public Broadcasting that, “The hope is that cuts can be made by eliminating open positions and cutting programs versus layoffs.” The district claims it will have to make \$130 million in cuts to honor the contract.

The method which PAT used to ram through the contract, as quickly as possible without giving workers time to study it, is a common tactic of union bureaucrats across the country. In August, the Detroit Federation of Teachers forced a snap vote for a contract that was also “basically a pay cut.” In September, teachers in Evergreen School District in Vancouver, Washington, were rushed into a vote by their union the same day classes resumed, which was described by teachers on social media as “some shady mess right here.” In both cases, teachers suffered sharp losses in

wages and working conditions.

One of Portland teachers' most important demands, a hard limit on class sizes for the district, was not met. Instead, if teachers have a class size that is over a certain threshold, such as 24 students for kindergarten, teachers get a measly 3 percent bonus. The National Institute for Early Education Research recommends that class sizes should be no larger than 20 and that there should be no more than 10 students for every teacher.

The union also dropped a call for a \$3,000 stipend for educators working with students with disabilities, and there are no guarantees about dealing with rodents and mold found in schools and classrooms. The only gains were small increases in planning time and more access to a \$1,500 stipend the district provides to multilingual staff, though it is not clear how many more teachers will actually get access to the funds.

The school district asserts that the reason it couldn't meet teachers' demands is because the "the Governor [Democrat Tina Kotek] and Legislature have failed to adequately fund education in Oregon." In particular, it rejected hard limits on class sizes because hiring enough teachers to meet demand would cost an additional \$65 million, on top of the \$175 million of what was passed.

The claim that "there is no money" for education is a decades-long lie. There is plenty of money in the US: nearly \$1 trillion is allocated to the Department of Defense each year for war, more than three times that spent on education. Trillions were handed out to Wall Street and the major corporations after the markets crashed in 2008–09 and trillions more were made available during the 2020 recession induced by the pandemic.

The trade union bureaucracy plays a particular role in supporting this lie. They function as a labor police force, working to keep strike activity to a minimum. When strikes do break out, they work closely alongside the Democratic Party to ensure that, whatever "fight" is waged, a settlement is reached that ultimately doesn't impinge on the profits of the super rich.

This is the experience of Portland teachers. PAT accepted the framework of the arguments put forward by Kotek and the state's financial manager, Kate Nass, which resulted in nearly all the teachers' demands being dropped or drastically reduced. PAT President Angela Bonnilla announced in a press conference

during the strike that "we have gone down twice since our original proposal."

The only way forward is for teachers to break with both the unions and the Democratic Party to form independent rank-and-file committees of, by and for educators. Similar to those that have been established by educators and other sections of workers internationally, these act as democratic organs where workers can discuss their demands and unite with others across the state, country and around the world.

The committees will also ensure negotiations are open and that there is real control by the rank-and-file over the process. Above all, they will unite the struggles of educators with those of all workers around the world.



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