

1,400 school workers strike Evergreen Public Schools in Washington state

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On Tuesday, August 26, more than 1,400 classified staff in the Evergreen Public Schools in Vancouver, Washington, walked out, launching the first strike in the district's history. The strike by members of the Public School Employees of Washington (PSE SEIU Local 1948) forced the district to postpone the start of the 2025–26 school year until September 2.

The workers—paraeducators, bus drivers, custodians, mechanics and food service staff—among the lowest-paid in the school workforce—voted by 92 percent to strike after five months of negotiations produced no agreement.

Evergreen paraeducators describe working second and third jobs, while custodians and drivers work unpaid hours, and many of the classified staff rely on food banks to feed their families. “Most of the paraeducators I’ve worked with over the years have second jobs during the school year and also during the summer, just so they can afford to pay rent and keep food on their tables,” said classroom specialist Brooke Lessley to the local media.

District officials claim that financial “realities” tie their hands. They point to a \$26 million projected shortfall over three years and warn that the district’s reserve fund will fall to 2.5 percent, below the board’s 5 percent policy. Their “final offer” to paraeducators included a 4.5 percent raise this year and further increases in 2026–27. But even these figures, by their own accounting, would leave workers’ wages well below the rising cost of living in southwest Washington.

The following Thursday, two days after Evergreen’s classified staff walked out, teachers in the Mead School District north of Spokane voted by 97 percent to authorize a strike. This was the first strike authorization vote by the district since the 1970s. According to the Mead Education Association, the teachers union and other staff may strike next week if there is no settlement by midnight Sunday.

In the next contract, Mead teachers are demanding enforceable limits on class sizes, adequate staffing and

support for students with disabilities, relief from overwhelming workloads and assurances of classroom safety. None of these demands require expensive new spending, yet district officials have refused to cooperate at every turn. Instead of rallying teachers for a strong fight, MEA President Toby Doolittle assured the district that their proposals “cost zero dollars to implement.”

The striking Evergreen workers are in the Public School Employees of Washington (PSE SEIU Local 1948). In Mead, many of those same categories of workers—paraeducators, custodians, food service, transportation and maintenance staff—are likewise under PSE locals, while office and clerical workers are in the Mead Association of Educational Office Personnel (MAEOP), also a PSE chapter. Yet PSE sanctions a strike in Evergreen while leaving its members in Mead isolated and sidelined, a conscious strategy to keep struggles quarantined and prevent unity.

Some groups, like office and clerical staff in MAEOP and many classified employees, are organized under chapters of PSE SEIU Local 1948—the same umbrella as Evergreen’s striking workers. Others are split off into separate locals such as MCPEA, MCTA and SASP. This overlapping maze ensures that even within a single district, workers who share the same conditions are carved up along artificial lines. The result is the same: a divided and atomized workforce. The existence of this structure is itself an indictment of the union apparatus, which enforces isolation and blocks a united struggle of educators and staff against austerity.

The last strike in Mead took place half a century ago, in 1974. That action was swiftly strangled in the courts, with a judge issuing an injunction against the teachers. The case reached the Washington Supreme Court, which overturned the injunction only on the technical grounds that the school board had authorized legal action in violation of the state’s Open Public Meetings Act. But the

strike itself was shut down within days. In the 50 years since, Mead teachers have not struck again, despite decades of deteriorating conditions. This silence is not the product of satisfaction but of the deliberate inaction of the unions, which have preserved “labor peace” while schools and classrooms fell into crisis.

The experiences in Evergreen and Mead must be seen alongside the recent betrayal of teachers in Philadelphia. Earlier this month, 94 percent of Philadelphia educators voted to strike against intolerable conditions. Anger among teachers was explosive.

Yet the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) intervened at the last moment with a sellout contract. The agreement included only a token 3 percent annual wage increase—below inflation—while offering harsher attendance discipline, higher healthcare costs and cosmetic parental leave provisions. It was celebrated by the district and the media because it guaranteed “three years of labor peace” and ensured that schools would open on time.

The rhetoric of the PFT, which had loudly threatened a strike for months, was not about securing improvements but about defusing a struggle that threatened to spread nationwide. By shutting down a movement that had overwhelming support, the PFT performed its function as the enforcer of austerity, smothering militancy on behalf of the state. The result is deepening austerity. This betrayal is not an exception but the method of the union bureaucracy as a whole.

The PSE and NEA have not yet imposed such a settlement, but their behavior already follows the same script: endless mediation, narrow “non-salary issues” and assurances that the districts cannot be pushed beyond “budget limits.” If workers do not break out of this straitjacket, Evergreen and Mead will go the way of Philadelphia. The anger of teachers and staff will be smothered, their struggles isolated and the austerity program preserved intact.

Nothing these educators face is local—it is part of the plan to end public education. Their demands for living wages, manageable class sizes and safe classrooms clash directly with the priorities of the American ruling class, which showers billions on corporations, the military and war while imposing austerity and privatization at home.

Both Democrats and Republicans have presided over decades of cuts that have gutted the Department of Education and slashed core programs. Title I funds for low-income students, afterschool programs and bilingual

education have been decimated. The pandemic was used as a pretext to deepen this offensive: Schools were reopened recklessly without resources, while privatization schemes—charter chains, online platforms, “learning pods”—were accelerated. Washington’s shortages and overcrowding are not the product of local mismanagement but the deliberate policy of the capitalist state.

Teachers across the state and nationally are looking to defend the right of all to high quality public education. In March and April this year, Washington state public workers rallied and protested against budget cuts and layoffs. But to mobilize this power, educators must form new organizations of struggle, committees of rank-and-file educators, parents and students independent of both the collaborationist union apparatus and the big business politicians of the Democratic and Republican parties.

These committees must link the struggles in Evergreen and Mead with those in Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles and beyond, and forge connections with autoworkers, healthcare workers, Amazon warehouse employees, logistics workers and every other section of the working class now flung into struggle.

Such committees must refuse the framing that “budget limits” are the horizon of struggle. The state budget’s \$16 billion shortfall is entirely manufactured, as billions are diverted to corporate subsidies, tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy and war. These funds must be redirected to hire educators, provide livable wages, shrink class sizes and supply the resources students need.

The strikes in Evergreen and Mead reveal educators’ strength—but without a break from union control, the path ahead mirrors Philadelphia’s capitulation. The betrayals of the unions, the bipartisan destruction of education, Trump’s slide toward dictatorship and genocide in Gaza all demonstrate that this is not a narrow contract dispute but a battle for the future of public education and democratic rights themselves.



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