

Evergreen classified staff in Vancouver, Washington defy district “final offer” amid legal threats

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On Friday, September 5, the school board of Evergreen Public Schools in Vancouver, Washington voted unanimously to authorize legal action against more than 1,400 striking classified staff. The workers—paraeducators, bus drivers, custodians, food service staff and mechanics—are members of the Public School Employees of Washington, an affiliate of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1948. The workers have been on strike since August 26, delaying the start of the 2025–26 school year. The board branded the strike “unlawful” and is prepared to seek injunctions and financial penalties, threatening to criminalize the struggle by its lowest-paid but most indispensable employees.

The state of Washington does not guarantee public employees the right to strike. At the same time, the state has set no specific penalties for striking. Courts have in the past, however, intervened with strikebreaking injunctions.

Hours before the board meeting, Evergreen staff gathered outdoors in Oakbrook Park—barred by the district from holding meetings on school property—and voted overwhelmingly to reject the district’s so-called “final offer.” That package offered between 9 and 12.5 percent raises over three years, depending on classification: paraeducators 12.5 percent, mechanics 9 percent, transportation staff 10–10.5 percent, and professional/technical, service, and maintenance workers 9.5 percent. Workers denounced the proposal as wholly inadequate in the face of skyrocketing housing, food and transportation costs in southwest Washington.

The cost-of-living crisis in Clark County is acute. Median rent for a two-bedroom apartment in

Vancouver now exceeds \$1,700 a month, while the starting wage for Evergreen paraeducators is little more than \$22,000 annually. Even the district’s “generous” 12.5 percent offer would still leave many below \$15 per hour—an income that qualifies a family of four for food assistance.

District officials insist that “fiscal realities” tie their hands, pointing to a \$26 million projected shortfall over three years and warning that the reserve fund will fall to roughly 2.5 percent, below the board’s 5 percent policy. Yet workers rightly note that these are district accounting choices, while billions continue to flow to Boeing, Amazon and Microsoft in the form of tax breaks and subsidies. Washington’s regressive tax system compounds the injustice. With no state income tax, the burden falls on sales and excise taxes that hit working families hardest. A paraeducator buying groceries pays proportionally far more than a Boeing shareholder or an Amazon executive.

Events in Mead, north of Spokane, reveal the same pressures. On August 28, teachers voted by 97 percent to authorize a strike after more than 16 bargaining sessions since May failed to resolve their most basic demands: enforceable class-size limits, adequate staffing for students with disabilities, relief from crushing workloads, and guarantees of classroom safety. Teachers spoke of trying to manage classes of 35–40 students, with little to no help when special education students needed additional support.

Yet on September 1, just hours before school was to begin, the Mead Education Association reached a tentative agreement with the district. The settlement averted a strike entirely, granting only a 2.5 percent raise this year, with future increases tied to the state’s

inflationary “IPD” formula, and offering nothing beyond vague assurances about safety and “collaboration.” Teachers’ demands for smaller classes and safer conditions were shelved, leaving overcrowded classrooms intact.

This is not the first time strike action by Mead teachers has been blocked. In 1974, when teachers struck, the district swiftly obtained a court injunction declaring the strike illegal. Although the Washington Supreme Court later overturned the injunction on a technicality, the strike itself was strangled within days. For half a century since, Mead teachers have not walked out, despite worsening conditions. This history looms large as Evergreen faces its own injunction.

The struggle by educational staff at Evergreen and Mead both confront the same issues. While SEIU Local 1948 in Evergreen was forced to sanction a strike, it has worked to contain the struggle, accept endless mediation and prepare to impose a settlement acceptable to the district.

In Mead, the NEA affiliate executed the same policy in a different form: steering a near-unanimous strike vote into a last-minute agreement before a picket line could be established. However different the tactics, the aim was identical: to prevent a unified fight and contain and suppress resistance.

The fragmentation of workers across bargaining units compounds this isolation. In Mead, many classified employees are under SEIU Local 1948—the same umbrella as Evergreen’s striking staff—while others are split among a whole host of locals such as MAEOP, MCPEA, and MCTA. This patchwork ensures that even when anger rises simultaneously, workers remain divided. Whether through sanctioning a strike in one district or smothering it in another, the bureaucracy functions as an arm of the state, preserving “labor peace” in the service of austerity.

The experience of Philadelphia teachers earlier this month provides an even sharper warning. There, 94 percent of educators voted to strike against intolerable conditions, only for the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers to impose a sellout contract at the last possible moment. Hailed by the district and the media for guaranteeing “three years of labor peace,” the agreement handed teachers below-inflation raises, harsher discipline, and rising health costs. The union’s goal was clear: to smother a struggle by tens of

thousands of educators that threatened to encourage struggles across the country.

The implications are clear. In Washington, the same political establishment that subsidized Boeing to the tune of \$8.7 billion in 2013 and shields the fortunes of Amazon and Microsoft now insists there is “no money” to pay paraeducators a living wage or to maintain safe classrooms. Nationally, both Democrats and Republicans have gutted education programs while funneling hundreds of billions into the military. The unions, boasting of their “seat at the table,” enforce these attacks by blocking independent action and tethering workers to a political system hostile to their needs.

Evergreen workers must draw the necessary conclusions. Their fight cannot be entrusted to the SEIU or the NEA, which collaborate with management to smother every outbreak of militancy. Nor can it be won through appeals to the Democratic Party, which presides over these attacks while handing billions to corporations and the Pentagon. The defense of public education requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, to link the struggle in Evergreen with Mead, Philadelphia and every district facing the same attacks. These committees must reach out to autoworkers, health care workers, logistics workers, Amazon warehouse workers and every section of the working class now entering into struggle.

The attack on Evergreen education staff further demonstrates that the ruling class will stop at nothing to break workers’ resistance, and that the unions will assist them at every step. But it also shows the immense potential power of the working class when it begins to fight. The task now is to transform this fight into a conscious political movement against austerity, war, and dictatorship and for the socialist reorganization of society to meet human needs, not corporate profit.



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