Evergreen classified staff strike ended with a sellout contract under union pressure

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On Thursday, September 11, classified staff in Evergreen Public Schools in Vancouver, Washington voted to ratify a tentative agreement, ending their 12-day-long strike. The walkout by more than 1,400 paraeducators, bus drivers, custodians, food service staff and mechanics— the first strike of its kind in the district's history—had already delayed the start of school for nearly 22,000 students.

The settlement was pushed through under the combined pressure of the school board's legal threats and the maneuvers of the Public School Employees of Washington (PSE), which operates as SEIU Local 1948. The deal was ratified by just 63 percent of voting members, meaning a substantial minority opposed. The district immediately announced schools would open Friday, September 12.

The union had originally demanded a 15 percent raise for paraeducators and pay for all hours worked. Instead, the ratified deal totals about 13.5 percent over three years overall, according to the union. In its last public offer before ratification, the district proposed 12.5 percent over three years for paraeducators, 10.5 percent for transportation staff and 9–9.5 percent for other classifications.

Crucially, the settlement denies workers pay for September, leaving them effectively without income for the first month of the school year. Other central demands—including retention pay, protections from unpaid work hours and meaningful improvements to working conditions—were either watered down or dropped entirely.

The district's "final offer," now enshrined in the contract, was touted as "fiscally responsible." Evergreen officials claimed a $26 million shortfall over three years made anything more impossible, even as they pressed ahead with injunction filings to force staff back to work.

From the outset, Evergreen's school board prepared to use the courts to smash the strike. On September 5, it voted unanimously to authorize legal action, branding the strike "unlawful" and directing the district to seek an injunction and financial penalties against the union. Days later, the district filed for relief in Clark County Superior Court, a move widely publicized in local press.

The threat was clear: the union faced escalating fines and potential criminalization if it failed to deliver a settlement. The PSE leadership seized on this to push through an agreement that fell far short of members' demands, framing capitulation as the only alternative to total defeat.

The claim that there is "no money" for education is a cynical lie. Every year, hundreds of billions are funneled into the US war machine, including the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. And trillions more are handed to the American oligarchy, such as the $100 billion in wealth recently gained by Oracle CEO Larry Ellison.

It is not a lack of funds that causes shortfalls in education, but the directing of society's wealth to militarism and Wall Street, the defining feature of capitalism.

Evergreen staff struck because decades of poverty wages and understaffing have become intolerable. Paraeducators—the largest group of classified staff—are among the lowest-paid workers in Washington schools. According to wage data, some Evergreen paraeducators earn as little as $13.35 an hour at the bottom of the scale, barely above the state minimum wage.

Even those at the higher steps often make only $20–$23 an hour, with a proposed range topping out near $31 in bargaining documents. For many, annual earnings amount to little more than $25,000–$30,000, before taxes and health care costs.

Such wages are impossible to survive on in Clark County, where rents and basic costs have risen sharply. Local reporting has documented paraeducators working second and even third jobs to cover bills, while others rely on food banks to feed their families. "Most of the paraeducators I've worked with over the years have second jobs… just so they can afford to pay rent and keep food on their tables," explained classroom specialist Brooke Lessley to *The Columbian*.

The outcome in Evergreen cannot be separated from developments in nearby Mead School District, north of Spokane. There, teachers voted by 97 percent to authorize a

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strike over class sizes, safety and workloads, only for the Mead Education Association (an National Education Association affiliate) to announce a last-minute settlement on September 1, before a picket line could even be formed.

Mead's non-teaching staff, meanwhile, are organized in multiple fragmented units under the same SEIU Local 1948 umbrella that oversaw Evergreen. This bureaucratic patchwork ensures that even when conditions are intolerable across the workforce, strikes remain divided and easily defused.

The tactical differences between Evergreen and Mead—a walkout smothered by mediation in one case, a strike authorization nullified in the other—are superficial. In both, the apparatus intervened to block a unified struggle and preserve labor peace.

The experience in Philadelphia show the consequences that follow such betrayals. After blocking a strike voted for by 94 percent of teachers, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers imposed a contract that paved the way for mass school closures. A new district report now lists dozens of schools as overcrowded or "unsatisfactory."

Up to 11,500 students could be displaced—even more than the 10,000 lost in the 2013–14 closures, when as many as 20 percent never re-enrolled and many dropped out. Community meetings have been little more than opaque exercises in justification. This is the outcome of "labor peace": the clearing of the path for austerity and destruction. It is precisely what Evergreen and Mead workers now confront if their struggles remain trapped within the union framework.

The battle in Evergreen is a concentrated expression of a nationwide campaign to dismantle public education. Earlier this year, the Trump administration and congressional Republicans unveiled plans to gut or abolish the Department of Education, slash Title I funding for low-income students and undermine the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Bilingual programs and after-school support are also on the chopping block. What remains of federal funding is being redirected toward private "school choice," vouchers and homeschooling.

These measures are justified under the cynical banners of "parental rights," "efficiency" and "choice," but their real purpose is to strip workers and youth of access to quality education, clearing the way for privatization and profit.

Both parties are complicit. Democrats posture as defenders of public schools, yet they have overseen decades of cuts, closures and high-stakes testing regimes that has paved the way for privatization. They accept the same corporate framework as the Republicans, ensuring that public education remains subordinated to the demands of Wall Street and the Pentagon.

The drive against schools is inseparable from the broader breakdown of American democracy. The same financial oligarchy dismantling education is backing Trump's preparations for authoritarian rule. The attack on teachers and school staff is part of a larger effort to suppress working-class opposition through repression at home and war abroad.

The outcome of the Evergreen strike must be taken as a serious warning. Workers fought courageously for nearly two weeks, confronting poverty wages, understaffing and decades of neglect. But their determination was systematically contained and ultimately derailed by the very organizations claiming to represent them.

The lesson is clear: the needs of educators and students cannot be secured through the existing union apparatus. These organizations function as enforcers for austerity, working hand in glove with the state and corporate interests.

To take the struggle forward, Evergreen staff, together with teachers, paraeducators and school workers across Washington and the US, must build independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves. Such committees would link struggles across districts, reject the framework of "budget limits," and fight for the resources schools truly need. They must turn outward, connecting with autoworkers, health care workers, logistics workers and every section of the working class now entering into struggle.

The defense of public education cannot be won in isolation, nor under the straitjacket of the unions and the Democratic Party. It requires the political mobilization of the working class against austerity, inequality and war, guided by a socialist program. Only on this basis can educators secure what they and their students require: living wages, safe and well-funded schools, and the protection of democratic rights now under assault.

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