

Teachers strike in Scranton, Pennsylvania

By a correspondent
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Some 900 schoolteachers and educational support staff in the public schools of Scranton, Pennsylvania, have walked out on strike to preserve health care benefits and stop increases in class sizes.

About 10,000 students at 16 schools did not attend classes on Monday due to the strike, which formally began at the close of the school day on Friday afternoon.

The teachers have been working under an expired contract since the start of the school year one month ago. At that time, the Scranton Public Schools administration gained a court injunction to block the strike, but this injunction was invalidated by the state labor board in mid-September.

The school district is demanding that teachers increase their out-of-pocket health care expenses. Any pay bump, meanwhile, would be tied to substantial increases in teacher workload. These reportedly include a proposal to add a sixth period for secondary-level instruction, an expansion of the length of the elementary school day, and the imposition of three non-paid workdays per year. The district is also demanding increased “flexibility” in class sizes. This reportedly includes a proposal that would allow for classes of 35 students at all grade levels.

Teachers on the picket line on Monday told the *World Socialist Web Site* that there are already classes with 35 students at the secondary level, and classes at the Kindergarten level—five- and six-year-olds—of 28 students. Teachers are well aware that increasing class sizes, adding periods, and lengthening the school day will very quickly be used as a justification for layoffs.

The union negotiating the contract, the Scranton Federation of Teachers, a unit of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has already indicated it is willing to accept cuts. “We were willing to help them, to up our health care contribution,” Scranton Federation president Rosemary Boland told a local

news source in early September, before the breakdown in negotiations.

The union has sought to draw teachers’ anger toward new district superintendent Alexis Kirijan, indicating that a union-busting campaign is being launched by the district. Only in her first year since being hired from the Atlanta public school system, Kirijan takes home \$150,000 per year. One teacher told the WSWS that Kirijan is already slated to receive a \$15,000 raise. “Starting teachers in Scranton can’t afford to pay back their school loans,” she said.

Yet Scranton teachers are facing far more than a school superintendent. Kirijan and the school district are invoking the state budget impasse between Democratic governor Tom Wolf and the Republican-controlled state legislature to justify their attacks. The delayed budget has blocked promised funding to public schools. This especially threatens schools in poorer and more-working-class areas such as Scranton, which cannot fall back on large real estate tax bases.

In Pennsylvania, Governor Wolf supports the elimination of pensions for newly hired state and school workers. Former Democratic governor Ed Rendell, in a recent talk show appearance, spelled out the ultimate aim of these proposals: “I think in 10 years there will be nowhere in the United States where there will be defined benefits, not in the private sector and very little in the public sector as well” (see “Pennsylvania Democrats call for elimination of pensions for new-hires”).

At the national level, the Obama administration is spearheading the attack on public education. The president’s proposed discretionary budget for 2016 allocates just under \$74.1 billion for education, scarcely one tenth of what the White House is demanding for the military.

Obama’s Race to the Top education program, just like the George W. Bush administration’s No Child

Left Behind, doles out funding to states, districts and schools that go the farthest in rolling back teacher work rules and advancing charter schools, while enforcing draconian testing requirements on teachers and students. The central difference between the two programs is that under Obama's, national union federation officials like Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, have been invited "on board."

The WSWS correspondent pointed out to teachers on the picket line that Weingarten "earns" more than \$500,000 in salary and perks, and that the AFT and its National Education Association counterpart funnel millions of dollars in dues to the same Democratic Party that is jointly attacking public education with the Republicans. The correspondent pointed to the powerful stand autoworkers have made against the collaboration of the UAW and the auto companies, and distributed copies of the *WSWS Autoworkers Newsletter*.

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