

Teacher strike in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania wins broad support

By our reporter
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A crowd estimated at approximately 1,000 picketed East Stroudsburg's South High School on Friday morning as teachers completed their first week on strike against demands for major health care concessions.

Teachers and professional staff in this northeastern Pennsylvania city of 11,000 people have worked for more than two years without a contract. In that time they have had no pay increases and regularly scheduled step salary increases have been on hold since a financial crisis in the school district during the 2014-2015 academic year. In real terms, teachers have suffered years of pay cuts.

Contract negotiations, however, are not about returning pay to teachers. They instead revolve around how much more teachers will give up—the major issue being health care contributions. The local affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA) representing the teachers has repeatedly proclaimed its readiness to offer concessions.

Emboldened by the NEA's capitulation, bargaining representatives for the East Stroudsburg Area School District are attempting to resolve the district's financial problems at the expense of teachers and students.

State mediators involved in the negotiations have indicated that the size of management's offer is sufficient, but that the money might be parsed differently between nominal pay increases—as little as 11.5 percent over the next half decade—and increases to health care premiums.

Despite the broad public support for the strike there is an imminent danger that the NEA will force teachers to accept a rotten deal, or that the state will seek an injunction to shut down the strike. Pennsylvania Secretary of Labor Pedro Rivera, a Democrat appointed by Governor Tom Wolf, used precisely this method to

break a strike at nearby Dallas public schools in June.

A correspondent for the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the picket line on Friday. It was immediately clear that local media accounts are playing down the level of support for teachers in the community. The crowd of pickets at South High School stretched unbroken for more than a city block, with teachers, students, and area workers marching two or three abreast and carrying scores of homemade signs.

Teachers on the picket line are under instructions from the union to direct all media questions to designated spokesmen. On Friday, this individual was Scott Hnasko, a fifth grade teacher with 22 years' experience, and also vice president of the local union, the East Stroudsburg Education Association (ESEA), which is affiliated to the Pennsylvania State Educational Association (PSEA) and the NEA.

"We've actually been in negotiations for 2-1/2 years, unfortunately, trying to get a contract accomplished," said Hnasko. "We have tremendous support. We have 583 members on strike. We are getting great support from the community, from parents and from students."

Hnasko, who was aware of a previous WSWs article on the strike, pointed to the unreasonableness of the school district, noting that the union has already promised significant concessions. According to a union representative quoted in a local press account, the union's bargaining proposal would actually result in a pay cut for many teachers.

The WSWs reporter asked Hnasko if he was aware of the teachers' strikes in Washington currently underway, and those this past spring in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona. The reporter argued that teachers' strikes across the country need to be linked up, pointing out that the problems are the same everywhere. "The problem," the WSWs said, "is that

the NEA and the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) keep these struggles isolated from each other.”

Hnasko expressed support for the strikes by teachers in other states, but had no answer as to why the unions had kept them separate. “That’s a good question,” he said, adding, “It’s hard to put it in perspective, but the PSEA has been supportive of us.”

Hnasko also pointed to the appearance of local politicians on the picket lines as a sign of support. The WSWS correspondent pointed out that the current Pennsylvania governor, Tom Wolf and former President Barack Obama had done grave damage to education in the state and throughout the country. “I’m not going to go there,” Hnasko responded.

Observing the union’s directive not to speak to the media, only one teacher agreed to an interview with the WSWS, on condition of anonymity: “Sandy” is a veteran special education teacher in the district.

Sandy said that the major issue in the strike is health care. She pointed to the fact that the district is sitting on nearly \$60 million in financial reserves. “The school board views us like glorified babysitters,” she complained.

When the WSWS correspondent asked her if she views the problem as a local issue, Sandy said emphatically, “No. It’s national. Teachers are disrespected everywhere.” She expressed support for teachers in Washington, as well as last spring’s major statewide strikes.

“All teachers should go on strike all across the country, and we should march on Washington and all the state capitals,” she said. “I think that would be wonderful. Then they would respect us.”

Sandy expressed concern for students coming from schools denied adequate funding. “It’s a tough job market,” she said. “They come out of school and then they have to move from job to job.”

Sandy agreed that the attack on teachers comes from both the Republican and Democratic Parties. She expressed anger over the standardized testing imposed on special education students through Obama’s Race to the Top Initiative. “Some special ed students will never be proficient on those exams,” she said. “All the tests do is make the students feel stupid.”

Emma, 17, Marissa, 14, and Hanna, 15, were on the picket line to support their striking teachers.

Emma, a high school senior, said she was angry that paying teachers was not a top priority. “I feel like our teachers need our support,” she said. “The school board is going to take away health care for their spouses,” she added, referring to a proposal that teachers’ health care premiums for spouses be drastically increased.

Emma said that lack of funding also affects students, pointing out that many student textbooks are badly outdated.

“This is a national issue,” Hanna said. “Teachers’ strikes are all over the news.”

Donovan, a retired IT worker who immigrated to the US from Jamaica many years ago, said he was there to support the teachers and because he has four grandchildren in the district.

“All over the world public education is the bottom priority for governments,” he said. “My view on it is that teachers mold the future leaders and workers and they need to be compensated for their important work.”

Donovan picketed with his grandson, Kevin, Jr. “Teachers deserve a raise,” Kevin said. “There should be enough money.”

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<http://www.wsws.org>