

Portland school teachers ratify new contract

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Portland teachers agreed to another belt-tightening union contract, but that wasn't enough for a crowd of well-connected critics who attended a March 7 school board meeting.

Stand for Children, a national school reform group headquartered in Portland, mobilized scores of would-be school reformers to attend the special board meeting, which was called to vote on the teachers union contract. The contract is the product of an employee-employer negotiation between the board and administration of Portland Public Schools (PPS) and teachers represented by Portland Association of Teachers (PAT). But Stand for Children members complained that they didn't have sufficient input into bargaining the contract, and they criticized the contract for preserving step increases and seniority rights. Their testimony — and attitude toward teachers — drew rebukes from several PPS Board members.

PAT leaders felt teachers had made concessions in the contract, and thought Board approval would be uncontroversial. The two-year contract, which teachers had ratified March 4, contains no cost-of-living increases.

"That was difficult for us to swallow," PAT President Rebecca Levison told the Labor Press. "But in tough economic times, we know that teachers need to tighten our belts. We're going to move forward and do what we do best, which is teach."

A schedule of "step increases" remains in the contract however, and that drew complaints from some Stand for Children members and at least one Board member. Step increases are raises employees receive periodically until they reach the top step in a wage scale. PPS teachers with a master's degree, for example, start at \$42,794 a year and get annual raises of 3 to 5 percent until they top out at \$62,940 after 12 years. The new contract also adds a new top step in July 2012, which amounts to a 2 percent raise for the roughly half of PPS teachers who are topped out. Those teachers will not have had a cost-of-living increase in three of four years.

David Wynde, who serves on the Board's finance committee, said PPS teachers' top salary step is currently the lowest of 16 metro-area school districts; after the raise, it would be 10th of the 16 if other districts don't give increases in the meantime.

The new contract makes no changes to health benefits. Teachers will con-



Sixth grade teacher Rebecca Levison — president of Portland Association of Teachers — testifies at the March 7 meeting of the Portland Public Schools board as her fellow union members look on. The Board voted 5-1 to approve a new contract with the district's 3,500 teachers and librarians.

tinue to contribute 7 percent of the cost.

The agreement also contains some changes the District has asked for in teacher workload and the length of the workday. Teachers at each high school will vote whether to add a sixth daily class to their teaching load and get smaller class sizes in the bargain. The two sides also agreed on a new method of evaluating teachers, which is being worked out by a labor-management committee that began meeting weekly in October.

Bargaining on the contract started Feb. 15, and the two sides announced tentative agreement March 2 — nearly four months before the existing agreement expires. That breaks the pattern for much of the last decade, during which negotiations dragged on months, even over a year, after contracts expired. PPS Board chair Pam Knowles described the new contract as a turning point toward a relationship based on collaboration — not conflict — between the district and the teachers union.

But members of Stand for Children criticized the contract for leaving seniority protections intact. The group's members said layoffs should target the worst teachers, not those with the least experience, and they proposed that the pay system be changed to reward improved teaching, not longevity.

Hearing that, Portland Jobs with Justice board member Laurie King got up to testify in defense of seniority. King used to teach at Sellwood Middle School, and told the Board that getting rid of seniority would lessen collegiality

among teachers.

"Putting teachers in a more corporate environment," King said, "would cause suspicion, competition, and an atmosphere of distrust, instead of the collaboration that is needed to keep learning and work well with the same students."

Board member Trudy Sargent was unable to attend, but she voiced her opposition to the contract in a letter that was read aloud by a Board secretary. Sargent said the contract was overly generous given the district's budget, and said she would have preferred a freeze on wages and benefits and a cap on the district's contribution to health benefits. Money going to step increases could be used to hire more teachers, she argued. Echoing Stand for Children, Sargent also criticized the District's failure to eliminate seniority protections in the event of layoffs.

Stand for Children has in the past allied with teachers unions around better funding for education, but it has increasingly advocated a conservative-tinted reform agenda — focusing on "bad teachers" as a paramount problem in education, portraying teachers union contracts as an obstacle to student achievement, and promoting CEO-style school leadership as the solution. Stand for Children promoted Waiting for Superman, a 2010 documentary that tarred teachers union leaders as villains standing in the way of reform.

"One great benefit of not running for re-election is you're finally free to say what you really think," said Board member Wynde, whose term ends June 30. Addressing the Stand for Children contingent, Wynde said, "I would have believed you all about your respect for teachers, if tonight, having heard from a sixth grade teacher who represents 4,000 of them, your response had been even polite applause." [PAT President Levison is a teacher at Clarendon-Portsmouth, a K-8 school.]

Because she was absent, Sargent wasn't able to vote on the contract. In

the end, the Board voted 5 to 1 to approve it. Martin Gonzalez, the sole dissenting vote, said he voted "no" because he lacked confidence that the District will properly implement it.

One factor in the early settlement may have been the district's desire for labor peace as it asks the public to ap-

prove two funding measures on the May 17 ballot. PPS is seeking voter approval for a \$548 million school facilities bond and an extension and increase in an existing operating levy. The facilities bond, Measure 26-121, would fund safety and other improvements to school buildings. The local option levy, Measure 26-122, would pay for teaching positions, replacing a levy approved in 2006.

The new contract covers 3,500 teachers, librarians, counselors, school psychologists and other educators. It's the largest of PPS' six union contracts. PAT, which is an affiliate of the Oregon Education Association, has a separate agreement covering substitute teachers that runs through June 30, 2012. Contracts covering members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 and Service Employees International Union Local 49 run through the same date. A multi-union District Council of Unions contract runs through December 2012. PPS is in informal negotiations with Portland Federation of Teachers and Classified Employees over a new contract covering classified employees; the existing agreement expires June 30.

PPS, with 42,000 students, is Oregon's largest school district.

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DAVID WYNDE
SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER



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