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Several hundred teachers, parents, students and supporters rally outside the headquarters of Portland Public Schools leading up to a Oct. 21 school board meeting to show support for the Portland Association of Teachers. The district is demanding concessions in the union contract, which could lead to a strike.

Teacher strike looms at Portland Public Schools

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Portland Public Schools (PPS) — Oregon's largest school district — appears to be headed for a teacher strike.

Oregon law says public employers have to negotiate with a union for at least 150 calendar days. Often in the past, bargaining between PPS and the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) continued many months beyond that minimum. This time, almost exactly 150 days after bargaining began April 18, PPS chief negotiator Brock Logan told PAT he would no longer meet face-to-face with them after Oct. 9. The dis-

trict moved to the next legally-required step — mediation. In mediation, a state-appointed mediator shuttles back and forth between bargaining teams, seeking agreement. One mediated bargaining session took place Oct. 14, and further sessions with the mediator are scheduled for Nov. 4 and 5.

Under the law, 14 days after mediation begins, the district could declare an "impasse" and move to impose its contract proposal on 2,975 teachers, librarians and counselors, who would have to either accept those terms or strike.

Teachers are in no mood to accept the district's terms. The district proposes to remove limits on teacher workload and class size, require teachers to pay 100 percent of health insurance premium increases, eliminate pay scales that reward additional training, and give wage increases of 1 percent, less than inflation.

Advised by a \$15,000-a-month consultant, the district has adopted a belligerent posture. It has lawyered up, waged a public relations effort against the union, and refused to discuss a union proposal to limit class size.

"We don't want to go on strike, but the board is forcing the issue," Grant High School chemistry teacher Bill Wilson told participants at a PAT rally before an Oct. 21 school board meeting. Wilson — who has served as a member of the union bargaining team three times before — says this time the district is taking a "minimalist" approach to bargaining: meeting only the minimum 150 days, and refusing to discuss subjects it's not required by law to discuss. The law says the two sides *must* discuss "mandatory" subjects like wages, hours, and working conditions, and *may* discuss "permissive" subjects like class size, curriculum, and evaluation criteria. In July, Logan presented the union a legal memo listing all the items that PPS now considers "permissive" subjects of bargaining and refuses to discuss, including many longstanding provisions of the union contract, which the district insists be deleted. When PAT negotiators tried to discuss those items during bargaining, Logan would raise his voice and threaten the union with legal action.

"Sitting down at the table was not yielding movement toward an agreement," said PPS spokesman Rob Cowie. "The district felt having a mediator come in and reach an agreement was the right next step."

PAT President Gwen Sullivan said mediation can help parties go the final mile toward agreement, but in this case, the two sides were far apart on major items when PPS ended direct talks. Here are some of the key flash points:

• COST-OF-LIVING INCREASES.

In principle, cost-of-living raises protect worker buying power against inflation. But Portland teachers have gone without cost-of-living increases in three of the last five years, losing ground to inflation that has averaged 2 percent a year. PPS started out proposing no cost-of-living increases at all for the next four years, but later increased its offer to 1 percent a year for the next four years. A separate unit of 1,200 school clerical and support staff represented by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) agreed to 1 percent raises in a two-year agreement reached in August. In September, PAT learned that PPS gave its administrators raises ranging from 5 to 10 percent. Now PAT is proposing 11.2 percent over two years, a figure Sullivan says matches raises given to some administrators.

• **STEP INCREASES.** Portland teachers are paid according to a salary schedule that rewards years of experience and additional education. Under this "step" system, teachers with a master's degree start at \$42,794 and receive annual "step" raises until they reach the top salary after 12 years — \$64,199. Teachers also move to the next pay scale for each additional 15 graduate credits they earn (roughly the equivalent of a term and a half of full-time study). PPS is proposing to eliminate the "Masters+15" and "Masters+30" pay scales, so that teachers wouldn't get the education-incentive increase until they reached 45 credits, the coursework equivalent of a doctorate degree. PAT disagrees.

• **HEALTH INSURANCE.** Like

(Turn to Page 2)

Carpenters Food Bank closes its doors

The Carpenters Food Bank handed out its last food box Oct. 18, ending a 30-year run serving needy families in the Portland metropolitan area.

The food bank, which started in 1983 to assist striking and out-of-work union Steelworkers and Carpenters, has been handing out food boxes longer than anyone has been employed at the Oregon Food Bank, noted Dean Alby, community food program director for the Oregon Food Bank.

That's not the case with the core group of volunteers.

Retired Steelworker Ted Totten, 83, and his wife of 62 years, Ann, have volunteered at the food bank since its inception. So have co-founders Mike and Sandy Fahey. Sandy passed away in July, and Mike, a retired executive secretary-treasurer of the Portland Metal Trades Council, said donations had slowed. On top of that, the Carpenters Union building that houses the food bank is for sale. The Carpenters Union donated space in the basement and paid for all the utilities. The building is located on the corner of North Lombard Street and Brandon Avenue in Portland.

Totten said several of the original food bank volunteers have died, and others have physical ailments that prevent them from working.

"I'll tell you, it's what's been keeping me alive," said Totten, who has un-

dergone three back surgeries.

Totten estimates that he's spent more than \$20,000 out of pocket for gas, tires, and maintenance on his truck, which he uses to pick up food supplies and deliver food boxes. "It's the only reason I need a truck," he said.

At its peak, the Carpenters Food Bank distributed 850 food boxes a month. Most recently it was handing

out 700 boxes a month. And the food boxes were some of the best in the city — nearly 70 pounds of dry goods, frozen vegetables, and some type of meat or poultry.

Alby said the Oregon Food Bank is coordinating with other food banks in the area in an effort to fill the void that the Carpenters Food Bank leaves in the community.



Ted Totten, a retired member of Steelworkers Local 330, has volunteered at the Carpenters Food Bank since its inception in 1983. The food bank shut down last month. Its last day was Oct. 18.