

...Teacher strike looms at Portland Public Schools

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many other employers, PPS used to offer fully-paid health insurance for teachers and their dependents. Since 2004, teachers have paid 7 percent of the premium. Now, the district wants to cap its current contribution at \$1,431.32 per employee per month, a limit which would rise by 2 percent a year. If insurance costs go above that cap, teachers would have to pay 100 percent of the increase. PAT disagrees, and proposes that the 93-7 split be continued.

• **WORKLOAD.** Teachers have summers off, but during the school year they work long hours: Beyond the hours they're required to be at school, they spend time at home preparing lesson plans and grading schoolwork. Large class sizes increase that "off-the-books" workload — and decrease the quality of the classroom experience. But the existing Portland teachers contract holds the line against overcrowding with a clause that says work load "shall be generally comparable to that which existed in the 1997-98 school year." Last year, an arbitrator interpreted that to mean, for high school teachers, no more than 180 students, or an average of 30 students per class, since high school teachers teach six classes. PAT proposes to update the clause to refer to the 2010-2011 school year. PPS proposes to eliminate the work load restriction altogether.

BATTLING CORPORATE EDUCATION REFORM

Beyond work rules and compensation, there's another dimension to the dispute. It's a battle over what public education will look like in years to come. Teachers perceive that they are under attack by a well-organized national movement, funded by billionaires and hedge fund managers, that is pushing a corporate ideology on public school systems. Core assumptions of this movement are that schools are failing, and that teachers and their unions are to blame. Proponents of what has come to be called "corporate education reform" place great stock in ratings and rankings: They believe that educational achievement

can and should be measured by extensive use of standardized tests, and they believe teachers and schools should be judged, ranked, punished and rewarded, for student test scores. Schools and teachers are told they must increase student test scores year after year, with no new resources, or face dire consequences. Principals are assumed to be competent and fair: They can tell good teachers from bad ones, and they should be given greater power to fire bad ones — or to force good ones to teach in bad schools. And if "outdated" teachers union rules on discipline or transfer get in the way, those must be swept aside. That's the nature of the "reform" sweeping through public education in Oregon and around the country, as teachers perceive it.

"Teachers are feeling attacked nationally," says PPS board member Steve Buel. "We need to be sensitive to that, and I haven't seen us be very sensitive to it."

Buel, a retired teacher, is founder of Oregon Save Our Schools, a group critical of the corporate education reform model. Buel says when teachers look at

the district's bargaining stance, they see the district following the national corporate education reform template. District bargaining proposals would expand management rights, and diminish teachers' rights.

In contrast, PAT proposed an alternate model of education. In a contract proposal titled "providing the schools Portland students deserve," PAT invites the district to join a fight for new sources of revenue to restore electives, asks the district to commit to reduce class sizes, and asks the district to ally with the union and parents to push back against educational reforms that narrow the curriculum.

"This is really a stepping-off point to figure out what we as teachers, parents, and community think public education should look like," Sullivan says. "We want to be education justice fighters. And maybe we don't get a raise this year, but we do get a counselor in every single building and a licensed media specialist, and help for kids. I think they don't know what to do with that."

PPS refused to discuss what PAT

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termed its "student-focused" contract proposal, deeming it a permissive subject of bargaining. In response, PAT submitted what it called a "district-mandated" proposal, inserting economic impact to some of its proposals. For example, the union proposed that the district give teachers a steep bonus if class size exceeds allowable limits. Since pay issues are mandatory subjects of bargaining, Sullivan says the proposal was intended as a way to force the district to talk about class size. The bonus isn't the point, Sullivan said; the point is to prevent unreasonable class sizes. But PPS painted PAT's class size bonus proposal as a money grab.

Meanwhile, the district is paying \$15,000 a month to labor relations consultant Yvonne Deckard. Deckard is a retired City of Portland human resources manager who is well-known to union members there for her aggressive style. Thus far, PPS has paid \$240,000 for Deckard's advice, on top of what it pays for its in-house HR director and director of labor relations. PPS is also paying outside law firm Miller Nash upwards of \$800,000 while also employing in-house counsel. For months, PAT asked during bargaining to see the district's outside legal bills, but received nothing but excuses.

And in press releases and other public communications, the district has gotten aggressive with the union, calling parts of the previous contract "outdated," and suggesting PAT was not se-

rious about bargaining because it declined to meet during the summer. Sullivan says bargaining has never taken place during the summer: That's when teachers work other jobs, take vacation, and enroll in classes.

With a strike beginning to seem likely, PAT has begun working to build community support. On Oct. 4, it launched a web site created by political consultant Mark Wiener, *teachersandparentstogether.com*. The site asks teachers, parents, and community members to sign up to receive email updates, and to spread the word about the dispute on social media.

A group of high school students — the Portland Student Union — has formed to support teachers. Several of its members have addressed the School Board, calling on the district to listen to teachers.

"Please, set aside your reckless union-busting agenda, and do your job," Cleveland High School senior Ian Jackson asked board members Oct. 21. The group is also circulating an online petition asking the district to return to the bargaining table.

"I think it's important to see the teachers union struggle in the larger context of the attack on workers," said Madison High School social studies teacher Adam Sanchez, chair of PAT's external organizing effort. "The teachers union is being attacked because it's the largest unionized sector in the United States."

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