

# ...Teacher strike wave hits Southwest Washington

From Page 1

the strikes: They want big wage increases. And they're entitled to them, as part of the settlement of an extraordinary decade-old lawsuit called *McCleary v State of Washington*.

## Decades of underfunding

In its 2012 decision in the case, the Washington Supreme Court ruled that the Washington Legislature had chronically underfunded public schools, violating the state constitution. Article 9 of the Washington State Constitution says, "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders." Not only hadn't the state been providing ample funding, but it was relying on school districts to fill gaps with local property tax levies.

So the Court in 2012 ordered the Washington Legislature to fully fund basic education, including school employee salaries, through regular and dependable tax sources — by 2018. But two years later, lawmakers had done next to nothing. At that point, the Court found the Legislature in contempt, and ordered fines of \$100,000 a day beginning August 2015. This June, to settle the case and stop the fines, legislators approved a funding package that massively increased school funding, with an additional \$2 billion allocated for employee raises.

Teachers see it as time to catch up after years of legislative malpractice. State lawmakers haven't just been violating the constitution; they've also been violating a voter-passed initiative. In 2000 — after teachers had gone without raises in four of the previous eight years — Washington voters passed Initiative 732, which mandated that school employees get at least inflation-based cost-of-living increases. Yet, since the measure passed, teachers have gone without an annual cost-of-living raise as many as six times. They even suffered a 1.9 percent pay cut in the 2011-2013 budget — at the height of the recession.

All told, average teacher pay in Washington state declined 8 percent in real (inflation-adjusted) dollars from \$58,829 to \$54,147 between the 1999-2000 school year and 2016-17, according to figures from the U.S. Education Department.



Outside Vancouver School District headquarters Aug. 31, striking Vancouver teachers, parents and supporters from other unions filled the sidewalks on both sides of the street for up to four city blocks. Passing motorists honked their support almost non-stop during the hour-long rally.



Above, community members donated water, and teachers at Evergreen High School carried it to fellow picketers. Below: Evergreen High School school secretary Marykay Munson-Syversen isn't a member of the teachers union, but she walked the strike picket line anyway to show solidarity. Munson-Syversen said she was very moved by the outpouring of parent support on the picket line; one handed strips of paper with the message: "We love you and support you! Thank you for taking the time to show us what it means to stand up for yourself even when it is difficult."



Now that they have additional funds from the state, districts around Washington are negotiating raises of 10 to 21 percent. But in eight Southwest Washington districts, school administrators offered smaller raises, talked

about using the windfall to build up reserve funds, and asked teachers to make other concessions — like taking on additional workload — in return for raises.

Those positions shifted once



the strikes got under way. On Sept. 4, Vancouver teachers voted by 92 percent to approve a new contract with raises of 12 to 13 percent. Striking Ridgefield teachers won a 26 percent pay increase over three years. Hock-

inson teachers won a 16.5 percent increase over two years. And the day before their strike was to begin, Camas teachers settled for a 12.5 percent increase over two years. As of press time, Evergreen School District was the biggest holdout.

"This money was already sent down by the governor, the State Legislature, and the Supreme Court," says Evergreen Education Association President Bill Beville. "They've all said this money belongs in teacher salaries, and [the district] is just holding on to it. Teachers are fed up. They're tired of being disrespected, and this is purely disrespect."

On the strike picket line outside Evergreen High School on day one of the strike, spirits were high. All day long, passing motorists honked their support, and parents, students and members of the community dropped by bringing water and snacks. Some parents handed out strips of paper with a message: "We love you and support you! Thank you for taking the time to show us what it means to stand up for yourself even when it is difficult."

"Kids and parents and dogs, everybody's walking the line with us," Beville said. "Among all the things that we expected when we went on strike, the most unexpected was the overwhelming support we're getting from the community. Even on Facebook, when people post negative messages, parents are jumping on them like piranhas."

## Public support at record high

A national poll released just as the strikes began shows just how strong public support for teachers is now. In the most recent annual PDK Poll on attitudes toward public schools, two-thirds said teacher salaries are too low, and just 6 percent said teacher salaries are too high. Not only that, but 73 percent of respondents said they would support public-school teachers in their community if they went on strike for higher pay. Support was even higher among parents of public-school students who would be most affected, at 78 percent. The perception of low salaries is taking a toll: Fewer than half of Americans — 46 percent — said they'd like their child to become a public school teacher — down from 70 percent in 2009 and 75 percent in the first PDK poll in 1969.