

Washington state leads the nation in school strikes, according to federal reports

Federal data shows a child in Washington is more likely to face school closures and reduced educational opportunities through union action than children in any other state

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Key Findings

1. Washington state leads the nation in teachers strikes; three of the twelve largest labor disruptions in the nation were called by WEA union executives.
2. More children in Washington are deprived of educational opportunities, due to negative action by organized labor, than in any other state.
3. State law against school disruptions and “no strike” clauses in union contracts are usually ignored.
4. State and school officials elected with union campaign funding are reluctant to oppose WEA strike demands.
5. Making union membership voluntary for all teachers would increase social justice and reduce conflict in school communities.
6. Ending strikes and increasing social peace and voluntary cooperation would create conditions for a better quality education for all children in Washington state.

Introduction

Recent data reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows Washington state leads the nation in teachers strikes, and that more children in Washington are deprived of educational opportunities due to the negative impacts of organized labor than in any other state. Union-led strikes that close schools to children are a recurring and disruptive feature of public education in Washington state. Each school year, often on short notice, one or more large school districts are threatened by executives at the WEA union with a teachers strike.

Washington is not a right-to-work state, and almost every public school teacher is required to join the WEA and pay union executives roughly \$1,000 in dues and other fees each year. Unions require that teachers pay these dues and fees or be fired. The funds are taken from public school budgets under accounts devoted to teacher salaries and benefits. Under the arrangement, union executives draw about \$34 million in public education money annually.

In 2015, three of the twelve largest labor disruptions in the nation were school closures called by WEA executives in Washington state.¹ No other state had teachers strikes involving more than 1,000 workers in 2015. The only other comparable public sector strike in 2015 occurred in Sonoma County, California, involving 3,800 employees represented by the SEIU union.

1 “Table 2, Work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers beginning in 2015,” Economic News Release, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U. S. Department of Labor, at www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.t02.htm.

Increase in WEA union strike actions against children

Recent years have seen a sharp increase in WEA strike actions against school children. Between 1993 and 2014, Washington state had a total of six teachers strikes involving more than 1,000 workers each.² During this period, only the state of California had more teachers strikes, with ten such strikes. California's school system is much larger than Washington's. Over six million students are enrolled in California's schools, as compared to just over one million students in Washington's schools.

This means a child attending a public school in Washington state is disproportionately more likely to have his or her education disrupted by a union strike than children in any other state.

Here are examples of recent threats and disruptions WEA union strikes have caused to children in Washington state:

Fall of 2016 – Union executives threaten a strike against families in the Northshore School District. To keep schools open, the superintendent promises pay increases of 11.3 percent to teachers and 24.1 percent to other staff;³

Fall 2016 – Union executives threaten a strike against families in the Evergreen School District. In response, school managers agree to a pay increase of 14.5 percent;⁴

Fall 2015 – Union executives in Seattle call a strike and close schools to 52,000 students;

Fall 2015 – Union executives in Pasco call a strike and close schools to 17,000 students;

April and May 2015 – Union executives impose continuing one-day strikes across the state, disrupting families in 65 districts and closing schools to 573,005 students. The union decision disrupts the education of 56 percent of Washington's public school students;

Fall 2013 – Union executives call a strike in Tacoma and close schools to 30,000 students;

Fall 2011 – Union executives call a strike in Bellingham and close schools to 10,000 students;

Fall 2009 – Union executives call a strike in Kent and close schools to 26,000 students;

Fall 2008 – Union executives call a strike in Bellevue and close schools to 16,000 students.

Ignoring “no strike” clauses

State law makes it clear it is illegal for teachers to go on strike in Washington, but the statute is rarely enforced.⁵ Most collective bargaining agreements in Washington contain a “no strike” clause, prohibiting unions from striking. The provision is routinely ignored. Most high-ranking officials in Washington, and many local school board members, were elected with strong union support. Union campaign contributions, taken from teacher paychecks, provide the financial core for many candidates running for public office. Once in office, very few officials are willing to contradict the program of WEA executives who helped elect them.

2 “Work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers, 1993 – 2014,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, U. S. Department of Labor, at www.bls.gov/wsp/monthly_listing.htm.

3 “Northshore teachers took less money in contract talks as show of unity,” by John William Howard, *Bothell Reporter*, October 5, 2016, at <http://www.bothell-reporter.com/news/391965441.html>.

4 “Evergreen teachers approve contract,” by Katie Gillespie, *The Columbian*, August 30, 2016, at <http://www.columbian.com/news/2016/aug/30/evergreen-teachers-to-vote-on-contract-tonight/>.

5 Revised Code of Washington, Title 41.56.120, “Right to strike not granted,” at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=41.56.120>.

The union uses strikes, and the threat of strikes, to intimidate school managers into giving large increases in salary and benefits, which in turn increase the amount of dues collected by WEA executives. Often these contracts are for sums the district cannot afford to maintain in the future. The threat of a strike places school managers under pressure to accept the union's demands, with some districts even signing contracts that depend on receiving large funding increases from state or local dollars.

This means teachers strikes prevent school managers from conducting labor relations peacefully. Out of fear of school closures, managers are cornered into becoming advocates for the union's demands for more money both from the state treasury, and from local property owners.

Policy Analysis

School strikes create conflict in neighborhoods and communities. Union strikes divide parents from teachers and teachers from administrators. Strikes damage the social fabric of school communities, especially in August and September, when families are returning to school with high hopes for a successful year.

People work hard to pay their taxes and support local schools. When union executives continually ask for more, and seek leverage in contract talks by shutting kids out

of school, it weakens the bonds of community that should draw people together.

Not all children are at risk of school closures. The education of students at Catholic and other private schools, students at public charter schools, and children who are homeschooled or take online courses are protected from the politics and controversy created by union strikes.

Recommendation

As long as the WEA union holds a dominant position in the public education system, Washington state will continue to be plagued by these illegal strikes, and Washington will lead the nation in school closures and disruptions.

State law requires school districts to transfer money from teacher paychecks to the WEA union each month, even if teachers do not wish to be members of the union.⁶ Repealing this law would reduce conflict in public education and help schools stay open to students. Making union membership voluntary would increase social justice for teachers and would foster stronger bonds among all people in school communities. Reducing conflict and increasing peace and voluntary cooperation among adults would create better social conditions for delivering a quality education to all children in Washington state.

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construed as an attempt to
aid or hinder the passage of
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⁶ "Union security provisions – Scope – Agency shop provision, collection of dues or fees," Revised Code of Washington, Section 41.59.100, at app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=41.59.100.