

Denver teachers strike backed by student walkouts

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Teachers in the Denver, Colorado, public school system entered their second day of striking on Tuesday morning, after a day of picketing in frigid temperatures and a rally at the Colorado Capitol building on Monday afternoon that drew hundreds of teachers and supporters. Thousands of high school students also walked out of classes in solidarity with their teachers Monday.

Officials for the Denver Public Schools (DPS) reported that 2,631 of 4,725 teachers, or 56 percent, did not report to work at the district's 207 schools, which provide education for some 92,000 students. The Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), which covers about 60 percent of DPS teachers, said that 3,700 teachers are striking.

The district is attempting to carry on instruction with hundreds of unqualified administrative staff and a much smaller number of substitute teachers. Its pre-kindergarten program has been forced to close down, affecting 5,000 small children and their families.

The DCTA only authorized the strike after 15 months of negotiations in which administrators stonewalled demands for modest pay and funding increases—and after a vote in which 93 percent of teachers balloted voted in favor of striking. Negotiations are set to resume Tuesday morning.

Colorado ranks dead last, 50th out of the 50 states, in teacher pay, though the cost of living in Denver, a metropolitan area of nearly 3 million, is among the highest in the country. Teachers are also subject to a draconian incentive system—co-designed by their own union—that ties pay to student performance, under conditions in which per-pupil funding in the state is 39th in the US.

Teachers have already won broad support from students, parents and workers in Denver.

“When we found out teachers were going to strike Monday, we knew we wanted to show that we stand in solidarity,” Denjaune Ellerbee told *USA Today*. “Without our teachers, this world wouldn’t work.” Ellerbee and hundreds of students walked out of their classes at South High School and joined teachers on the picket lines Monday.

South High School was not alone. The district admitted in an e-mail letter to parents that hundreds of students at East High School launched their own walkout at 8:30 a.m. in solidarity with teachers. The school retaliated by refusing the students readmittance.

There is evidence that DPS is losing control of its high schools and middle schools. A video shared widely on social media showed students occupying hallways later in the day at East High School, defying orders that they attend classes taught by substitutes. Clips show students yelling and dancing. Administrators in at least one district school, Discovery Middle School, preempted such information sharing by confiscating students’ cell phones, and forbidding backpacks and binders.

Several hundred more students left East High School later in the day. Outraged students revealed that they were gathered in the auditorium in the morning and given bogus “assignments” to keep them busy. “The person in our classroom admitted she wasn’t a certified sub,” Caitlin Kenney, a senior, told local media.

Meanwhile, some parents have decided to hold their children out of school during the strike. In a clear attempt at intimidation, the DPS has warned that such absences will be marked as “unexcused” and therefore jeopardize student grades.

The DCTA, like the national unions that falsely claim to represent teachers—the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—has

focused its efforts on appealing to the Democratic Party. During the rally at the state capitol building on Monday, Democratic politicians made photo op appearances, and NEA head Lily Eskelsen Garcia (salary \$414,824) addressed the crowd with the usual appeals about voting for Democrats in the next elections.

The Democrats, however, are just as much the enemies of teachers and public education as the Republicans. As in many other states and cities, the miserable pay and conditions in Denver schools are largely a result of the Democratic Party, which has dominated both Denver and Colorado politics for years. In fact, the DCTA finally authorized a strike only after teacher opposition, inspired by similar struggles in Los Angeles, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and elsewhere, was no longer possible to contain.

Rob Gould, lead negotiator for the DCTA, told reporters that the strike was “the last tool in our tool chest.” In fact, the union has done everything to prevent strikes and to isolate and defeat them if they erupt. The last time the DCTA authorized a strike was in the second year of the Clinton administration—a quarter century during which Denver teachers have been impoverished and the public schools starved.

Teachers throughout the US and internationally, however, have been compelled to take up a fight for improved wages and funding, which has pitted them both against the unions and the bipartisan assault on public education. Teachers in Oakland have voted by 95 percent to strike as early as next week. West Virginia teachers, after being betrayed by the unions last year, have voted overwhelmingly to strike against the first ever introduction of charter schools in the state and other privatization schemes. Chicago charter school teachers remain on strike.

Teachers are striking or joining broader movements against austerity and social inequality in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Kenya, South Africa, Tunisia, New Zealand and other countries.

If the Denver teachers are not to be isolated and sold out, then they must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions by forming rank-and-file strike committees to fan out to mobilize teachers, parents, students and broader sections of workers throughout Colorado and beyond. A call should be made to all workers in Denver to set up mass pickets to

stop the district’s strikebreaking efforts.

The broadening of the strike must be combined with the fight for the development of a political movement of the working class. The right to living wages and fully funded public education is only possible if workers carry out a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate and financial plutocracy and the two capitalist parties that do its bidding.



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