

Durham, North Carolina teachers picket for union recognition, pay dispute resolution

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Teachers in Durham, North Carolina held “walk-in” pickets at 23 schools on Friday, May 17, to demand the Durham Public Schools board of education to officially recognize their union. The demonstrations are the latest in an ongoing dispute over pay, short staffing, and poor working conditions in the public schools that erupted earlier this year.

Between July and October of last year, teaching assistants and other classified staff in Durham County received a pay raise of 25 percent. The raise was a much-needed increase on pay that was far lower than the national average. One analysis of staff pay found classified staff had not gotten cost-of-living adjustments for a decade.

In the midst of runaway inflation on housing and basic need, many classified employees had been working multiple jobs and living in poverty. When they received raises, many took steps to ease their stress by dropping second jobs or moving into larger apartments.

Then without warning in January, the district announced that the DPS budget was short by \$27 million. DPS declared that the raises had been given in error to 1,300 workers and demanded that staff pay back the money. Some school employees began receiving paychecks of only \$10.

Bus drivers and cafeteria workers began staging sickouts in mid-January. In early February, the Durham Association of Educators, under pressure from the rank-and-file, called a protest that shut down 12 schools. The opposition won support from parents and students and forced the resignations of DPS Superintendent Pascal Mubenga and Chief Financial Officer Paul LeSieur.

Months later, the dispute has yet to be resolved. Francisco Dolz, a Pearisontown Elementary physical education teacher picketing Friday, told WRAL News

he anticipated many of his coworkers would be forced to leave the profession if pay did not improve. “We are probably going to see a mass exodus of workers because people’s lives are in limbo right now,” he said. “We need to work extremely hard to improve our working conditions because we know, in turn, that will improve our students’ learning conditions.”

Riverside High School US history teacher Allison Swaim said, “People are tired of not having a say in our working conditions. We want to collaborate with each other, with the district, and ultimately improve schools for our kids.” She noted that turnover has been high. “So many people in the last few years, more and more, have been leaving. A lot of the reasons why people are leaving is a lack of funding, a lack of investment in our schools. People are leaving because the pay is not matching the cost of living.”

Nationally, North Carolina ranks 38th in teacher pay with an average salary of \$56,559. This is about \$13,000 lower than the national average.

The Durham-Chapel Hill metro area is home to several universities—including Duke University, a private school with an annual attendance cost of \$82,749—which pushes up the cost of living considerably for working class residents. Housing, groceries, utilities, and transportation costs in Durham are all higher than the state averages.

At the same time, public infrastructure is woefully underfunded. The Durham County government’s allocation of \$13 million for public schools in the 2024-2025 fiscal year is \$14 million short of what the district has requested to compensate its workforce. DPS reportedly needs \$8 million to raise pay for classified employees, but the budget covers only \$4 million.

Meanwhile, the North Carolina legislature is expanding its school voucher program by \$230 million,

to \$400 million per year. Most of the money will go to wealthy families whose children are already enrolled in private schools. The state's voucher program is among the least regulated in the country and does not require outcomes data from schools that benefit from taking students out of the public system.

Statewide, working class families face a waitlist for public pre-Kindergarten slots, high teacher turnover and record vacancies. In 2022, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that the state's school funding was unconstitutionally low, a violation of the right of 1.5 million children to receive a "sound basic education."

North Carolina is one of two states in the US (along with neighboring South Carolina) where public employees are banned from collectively bargaining contracts. Strikes by public workers are illegal, classified as a misdemeanor, and punishable by jail time.

The DEA, careful not to call the sickouts and demonstrations in Durham strike actions, has directed the protests toward winning a "meet-and-confer policy," where the Durham board of education will recognize the union in budget decision-making.

Workers must be warned: a seat at the table in district negotiations for union bureaucrats will do nothing to resolve the systemic underfunding and oppressive conditions faced by public school employees. The NEA, and its state and local affiliates, is eager to get teacher anger under control, to wield it selectively for its own political purposes and to smash opposition when it threatens the agenda of the Democratic Party it serves.

The NEA is thoroughly integrated into the Biden administration, which has bled public education dry while pumping hundreds of billions of dollars into genocide in Gaza, imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine, and other military actions around the world.

The Biden administration ended the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief program when it gutted its pandemic response, depriving schools of \$30.75 billion in "education stabilization" funding. As a result, 384,000 full-time public school positions are on the chopping block, a figure that likely underestimates the scale of the massacre.

Any struggle for better conditions in the schools will

run up against the political establishment and the capitalist system it represents. The trade unions act as props for the Democrats; their interests lie in suppressing the class struggle. Teachers and support staff must organize rank-and-file committees independent of the union apparatus and seek to form unity with working class families enrolled in the schools to advance their common interests.

Make your voice heard! Fill out the form below to tell us what your working conditions are like and what you are fighting for. We will protect your anonymity.



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