

Colorado teachers join national wave of protests and walkouts

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Some 500 Colorado educators converged on the capitol building in Denver Monday demanding increased school funding and higher wages. The teachers chanted: “You left me no choice, I have to use my teacher voice!”

All classes in the Denver-area Englewood school district were cancelled as more than 150 teachers from the district walked out of class to attend the annual Colorado Education Association’s lobby day.

The wave of teacher walkouts has mostly occurred in states with Republican governors and Republican-controlled legislatures, including West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and Kentucky. Colorado, however, has a Democratic governor and the Democrats control the lower legislative house, the Assembly. The conditions facing teachers and students, however, are no better than in Republican-controlled states, demonstrating that the assault on public education and the wages and conditions of educators is a bipartisan policy.

Teachers massed outside the doors to the capitol building Monday afternoon. They attended a Finance Committee hearing on SB 200, a bill that would cut public employee retirement benefits to shore up PERA, the state retirement plan.

Teachers are opposing the bill’s provision raising the retirement age to 65 and demanding that adequate cost-of-living adjustments be built into PERA. Colorado’s teachers do not collect Social Security after retirement and many do not earn enough to invest in other retirement plans, leaving the state’s retirement plan as their only option.

A primary concern of teachers is wages. Colorado teachers earn about \$7,000 less than the national average of \$58,064 a year, according to a survey by the Colorado School Finance Project. An analysis of data

from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that as a percentage of state median income, Colorado high school teachers are paid less than teachers in any other state.

According to the National Education Association, teachers in Colorado took in the second-lowest salary of any state in 2015, receiving an average of \$44,421. In 2016, they jumped a few positions to 46th overall, with an average salary of \$46,155. However, taking inflation into account, their salaries have dropped 7.7 percent in the last decade. In rural areas, some teachers make as little as \$24,700 a year.

The low pay, combined with other factors, accounts for Colorado’s teacher shortage, which mirrors a national trend. According to the *Denver Post*, as many as 3,000 new teachers are needed to fill empty slots in classrooms.

Bob Mantooth, a physical education teacher, told the *Denver Post*, “For these young teachers, there’s no future. You won’t get people entering into this profession. They don’t want to go into poverty teaching.”

The teachers are also demanding that legislators freeze corporate tax breaks until school funding is secured or the per-student funding reaches the national average. According to the Colorado Education Association, the state’s schools are under-funded by at least \$828 million. Colorado ranks 42nd in per-student funding, \$2,500 below the average. The typical Colorado teacher pays about \$650 a year out of his or her own pocket to purchase supplies for students.

As with many issues of public finance in Colorado, much of the blame for a lack of school funding and low teacher pay rests with the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights (TABOR), a 1992 constitutional amendment that severely limited state and municipal governments’

ability to fund social services.

Under TABOR, state and local governments cannot raise tax rates without voter approval and cannot spend revenues collected under existing tax rates without voter approval if revenues grow faster than the rate of inflation and population growth. Since its implementation, TABOR has spelled disaster for social services in Colorado.

“The bulk of the damage comes in areas of child care and education,” said Scott Wasserman, president of Colorado’s Bell Policy Center. “We don’t have nearly enough subsidized preschool slots, we don’t fund full-day kindergarten, half of our schools have four-day school weeks and tuition has gone up consistently over the past decade.”

The Colorado Education Association (CEA) endorsed the rally in an effort to contain the growing movement of rank-and-file teachers and corral it behind the Democratic Party. It has refused to call a strike against the attack on pensions and the continuing underfunding of the schools.

The CEA Facebook page on Monday included angry posts by teachers denouncing the union. “Why aren’t you organizing our walkout?” read one. “Where is an organized state-wide walkout? Englewood should not be doing this alone,” read another.



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