

“Do you work your best when you work for peanuts?” ask Pueblo teachers

First teachers’ strike in Colorado since 1994 now in third day

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About 1,000 teachers and paraprofessionals in Pueblo, Colorado continued their walkout for the third day on Wednesday. For Colorado educators who are fighting the effects of years of de-funding public education alongside their counterparts across many states, “Teacher Appreciation Week”—observed this week throughout the US—rang particularly hollow this year.

This is the first strike in the state since 1994 and the first ever for Pueblo, where teachers had worked without a contract since last August.

On Tuesday, nearly 1,000-strong, educators and their supporters picketed the District 60 administration building and held a lively rally. And on Wednesday several hundred teachers protested at Mineral Place Park. Carrying signs including “On strike for my students,” “Support Public Education,” “Do you work your best when you work for peanuts?” and “Highly qualified, poorly paid,” the teachers were also joined by many students.

“We would rather be in school. Sometimes you don’t always want to be there, but for these teachers who pour everything into us, we should show our support and pour everything into them as well,” said Palo, a sophomore.

The Colorado Education Association (CEA), the Colorado Paraprofessional Education Association (CPEA), and two administrators from District 60 addressed the Wednesday rally, all parties hypocritically claiming they “supported” the educators. The fact is the district is adamant in refusing to budge from its Friday offer; a miniscule one-time bonus of roughly \$1,000 per teacher for this school year, and a cost of living adjustment of 2.5 percent and a monthly stipend of \$50 next year to supposedly offset skyrocketing health care premiums. These scraps were previously rejected by the

rank and file in two separate votes.

Moreover, the district said it would open Haaff Elementary to all students and four high schools to online students on Wednesday. One teacher angrily described this as a “type of scabbing” explaining to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the aim was to deplete the substitute teachers pool and maximize pressure on strikers.

For its part, the CEA sought to prevent the strike. As in teacher struggles in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, it was the initiative of rank-and-file teachers that forced the strike action, in this case by means of a series of sickouts. When the CEA was unable to quash the rebellion, they sought to isolate it. Despite the fact that on April 26-27—as Arizona teachers carried out a statewide strike—more than 10,000 Colorado teachers walked out to demonstrate at the capitol, the union did everything in its power to prevent a statewide walkout in Colorado.

The CEA has limited its demands to insultingly inadequate sums. It has asked that the 2 percent increase be in the form of a cost-of-living adjustment and a \$30 per month health insurance payment this year. It has pointedly refused to raise any demands to address the statewide per-pupil funding crisis, or to impinge on the profits of big business in any way. Colorado’s major profit-takers included military contractor Lockheed Martin, energy companies Newmont Mining and Xoom Energy, telecommunications giant Ultra Mobile, and financial services companies Optima Tax Relief, Quick Bridge Funding, Goldco Precious Metals and Access Point Financial.

As was done in the betrayal of the 60,000-strong Arizona teachers’ strike and the West Virginia and Oklahoma strikes, the union has sought to divert the

energy of teachers away from expanding their struggle and uniting with other sections of workers in favor of promoting Democratic Party candidates. In Colorado, this has taken the form of advocating for gubernatorial candidate Cary Kennedy (also endorsed by the Colorado AFT), whose program calls for support to charter schools and standardized testing.

The Democratic Party has long spearheaded the assault on public education in Colorado, most recently under the current term-limited governor, multimillionaire John Hickenlooper, also a supporter of charter schools. Since 2008, the Democrats have overseen the elimination of \$8.6 billion from the state's funding of public schools. In addition, Hickenlooper admitted that the state borrowed over a billion dollars from the state education fund.

A major part of Colorado's education shortfall is the ongoing transfer of hundreds of millions of dollars from state residents to Wall Street interests via, among other measures, the 1992 "Taxpayer Bill of Rights" (TABOR), a constitutional amendment passed by voters. First enacted under Democratic Governor Roy Romer, the measure has been retained since that time, except for a five-year period beginning in 2005. At the same time, the state enacted a plethora of business tax cuts including the Advanced Industry Tax Credit, Colorado FIRST, Enterprise Zone Tax Credits and dozens more.

Under these regressive tax policies, Colorado's public services have been seriously defunded. K-12 spending went into a drastic decline. Colorado's support to public schools fell to 48th in the nation, while higher education support went to 46th.

Since 2012, teacher health insurance costs in the state have increased by 70.4 percent and per-pupil spending has fallen precipitously. Half of Colorado's school districts have cut back to a four-day week. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has estimated that \$340 million in property taxes will be lost in 2019 alone as a result of TABOR. Additionally, Colorado has now fallen to the bottom of national rankings in providing children with full vaccinations; at one point the vaccination program was suspended because the state couldn't afford to buy vaccines.

Unlike the well-heeled unions, which have suppressed any struggle over this social counterrevolution, teachers are deeply angered by the terrible inroads that years of underfunding and budget cuts have created and are looking for a broad-based solution. "It's pretty frustrating," Julie Cain, a high school teacher, told NBC News. "Sometimes we have old textbooks that are falling

apart. We don't have computers in our classroom."

Many pointed to the 20 percent turnover rate in Pueblo's District 60 as a result of low wages, lack of supplies and increased class sizes. Eva, a fifth grade teacher at Heros Academy, posted a video on Facebook stating, "We cannot keep highly qualified teachers in our classrooms. Something needs to change to have a highly qualified teacher in every room with every student."

In a similar vein, Marie from Corwin International Magnet School said, "I am out here today to support Pueblo students. We cannot sustain the beauty of Pueblo with fading schools. We have got to have teacher voices in the classroom ... We cannot continue to lose this fight. For a beauty city and state, we have to have great public schools and that's what we're out here fighting for right now."

Meanwhile, students continue to take the initiative to support their teachers around the country. About 80 students at Ballard High School in Des Moines, Iowa walked out of school on Tuesday to support the fight for a pay increase by their teachers. Elizabeth Schmidt, a junior, and Mackenzie Kraling, a sophomore, circulated a flyer that said teachers in the Ballard district were not going to receive a pay increase this year, adding that their teachers are expected to work more.

"It is starting the conversation. We're drawing attention to something that is important, which is showing love and respect for our teachers, which is something we really need to do now in society," Kraling told a local media outlet.



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