

As Pueblo teachers strike continues

Colorado Democrats slash teacher and public employee pensions

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Late on Thursday night, Democratic State Governor of Colorado John Hickenlooper signed into law sweeping cuts to teacher and public employee pensions that will have a devastating impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers.

The bill cutting the state's Public Employees' Retirement Association (PERA) was rushed through the Democratic Party-controlled House on the final legislative night of the year, by a vote of 34-29. It includes the following measures:

- The retirement age will be raised by six years, from 58 to 64, for future teachers, and from 60 to 64 for future public employees.
- Current teachers will be forced to contribute an extra two percent of their salaries toward their retirement, from 8 to 10 percent.
- For the next two years, the two percent annual cost-of-living adjustment to pensions will be frozen. For a retired worker on a pension of \$25,000, this is a reduction of \$500 each year. After the two years, the cost-of-living adjustment will be set at 1.5 percent—below the rate of inflation—and can be reduced further.
- School boards, which have already been starved of \$8.6 billion in funds by the Democratic state government over the past nine years, as well as local government agencies will be made to contribute an additional 0.25 percent to pensions from their existing budgets, which will contribute to further layoffs and cuts to school programs.

Hickenlooper boasted about the cuts in a press conference on Thursday night. "Everyone gave," he said. "You talk about a difficult compromise. The retired state workers made compromises. The active

workers made compromises..." He declared that while it was important to "strike while the iron was hot," further cuts could be in store: "If there is another step, that can always be done."

In a press conference the same evening, Republican Senate Majority Leader Chris Holbert personally praised Democratic House Majority leader KC Becker and representative Dan Pablon as "great minds" for their work in passing the bill.

The Democrats and Republicans were able to carry out these attacks only due to the role of the teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), which have systematically demobilized and suppressed teachers' opposition.

On April 26-27, tens of thousands of teachers shut down schools across Colorado, including in ten of the largest school districts, to demand increased wages, school funding and payments toward PERA. Like the educator strikes that have taken place in Arizona, Oklahoma and West Virginia since the beginning of the year, the walkouts in Colorado were driven by the rank and file and developed in opposition to the Colorado Education Association, which called for only a rally in the state capital and refused to call workers on strike.

The unions were all the more determined to shut down the walkout in Colorado because it took place during the six-day statewide walkout by tens of thousands of teachers in neighboring Arizona. The unions have sought above all to isolate the strikes on a state-by-state basis and prevent them from linking up into a national movement.

The role of the Democrats in slashing teachers' pensions is all the more revealing, because it exposes

the central lie that has been used by the Democrats and the unions in betraying the teacher walkouts. In Arizona, Oklahoma and West Virginia, which are controlled by Republican governors, the unions shut down the strikes without addressing any of teachers' main demands, declaring that the only way to fight for public education was to "remember in November" and elect Democrats in the November 2018 elections.

But when the Democrats are in power, as in Colorado, they impose no less brutal attacks on workers than Republicans. Predictably, the national media outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which are connected to the Democratic Party and have sought to present the teachers' struggles as a "red-state rebellion" against Republicans, have been completely silent on the pension cuts in Colorado.

The Colorado Education Association's (CEA) continuing role in consciously isolating and demoralizing teachers' opposition is shown in Pueblo, Colorado, where 1,000 teachers have been on strike since Monday, closing more than 30 schools in school District 60, demanding wage increases for teachers and paraprofessionals.

The CEA has kept the strike isolated to a single school district, while promoting Democrats as teachers' allies. On Thursday afternoon, six hours before state Democrats voted to pass sweeping pension cuts to teachers, the CEA and Pueblo Education Association (PEA) invited Democratic state representative Daneya Esgar to address striking teachers and posture as their ally.

The unions are using the Pueblo teachers to send a message to other school workers throughout the state: if they seek to strike against the attacks on their conditions, they will be isolated and betrayed by the union. The isolation imposed by the union has already emboldened the school district to reopen three schools on Thursday and Friday.

This morning, the PEA and the school board are holding further negotiations, where they will seek to reach a sellout deal. The union's demands have been limited to a paltry wage increase of two percent, in the form of a cost-of-living adjustment, and a \$30 per month health insurance payment.

Both corporate-controlled parties and the media have defended the slashing of public workers' pensions with the claim that it is necessary to make the PERA fund

financially "viable." These are self-serving lies. Neither party will touch the immense wealth of the corporate and financial elite, including the giant oil and gas corporations, whose interests they serve.

A study by Larson Silbaugh, the principal economist of the Colorado Legislative Council Staff, released on January 12, pointed to the impact of systematic tax cuts for the energy corporations on Colorado's state budget. In 2015 alone, for example, a total of \$10 billion of oil and gas was pumped in Colorado, but, after various tax concessions were applied, the effective tax rate on the energy giants that year was 0.2 percent.



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