

Denver, Colorado teachers move closer to strike action

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As 33,000 Los Angeles teachers began walking picket lines on Monday, simmering anger over continuing underfunded education, poor pay, diminishing pensions and chronic teacher shortages is already beginning to come to a boil in other school districts around the US. Teachers in Denver, Colorado will decide by the end of this week if they will strike against the Denver Public Schools (DPS). Teachers have been attending open negotiating sessions, holding strike preparation meetings and speaking to parents over the last week.

“I feel the quality of schools in Colorado is very poor and is directly related to the lack of funding,” said one resident to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The infrastructure is decaying, we can’t keep teachers and it’s all in a downward spiral. It’s ripe for a fight and I feel the struggle in Los Angeles will have an impact here and all around the country.”

If negotiations with DPS fail to produce an agreement by January 18, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), an affiliated union of the National Education Association (NEA), will hold a long-delayed strike vote on January 19, after working under an extended contract since last March. The union notified the Colorado Department of Labor on January 8 of its intent to strike under the state’s mandatory 20-day strike notice law, setting January 28 as the earliest a walkout could begin. It would be the first strike of Denver teachers since 1994.

District superintendent Susana Cordova declared, “we are committed to keeping our schools open if union members decide to strike.” She has threatened that if no agreement is reached and a strike vote is called, she will “immediately ask the state to intervene.” At the height of the “Teacher Spring” last April, a bill was introduced into the Colorado

legislature to outlaw teacher strikes, but failed to pass. The state could decline to intervene, as it did during a week-long strike in the Pueblo school district last May.

Like California, Denver teachers are moving into struggle in a state politically dominated by the Democratic Party. Formerly one of the 10 wealthiest members of Congress (2009-2019), newly-elected governor, multi-millionaire Jared Polis, previously served on the state Board of Education. He has also founded his own charter schools with multiple campuses in several states. His gubernatorial campaign was endorsed by the Colorado Education Association, whose president, Amie Baca-Oehlert, said that the organization’s members “share Jared’s concern that too many communities don’t have the resources they need for every child to succeed.”

Teachers in Colorado protested last April as part of the wave of teacher strikes and protests that swept the country, but went back to work statewide with none of the issues of salaries, incentives or classroom funding resolved. The state ranks 39th in per-pupil spending. The Economic Policy Institute ranks Colorado teacher pay 50th in the country compared to other college-educated workers. The median salary for teachers statewide is \$52,480.

Meanwhile, 103 districts in the state have shifted to four-day weeks, primarily to reduce costs, and their numbers are on the upswing. As districts have lost their ballot attempts to increase property taxes on homeowners, schools have found themselves with little choice but to cut the learning time of students.

Colorado teachers, as those in 14 other states, are ineligible to collect Social Security, and are dependent on the state workers’ pension plan. On the last day of the 2018 state legislative session in May, Senate Bill 18-200 passed with bi-partisan support. It raises new

teachers' retirement age from 58 to 64, requires public employees to put an additional 2 percent of their pay into the retirement system, and reduces cost-of-living raises for retirees. The average annual retirement payment for a teacher was \$37,000 in 2016.

Denver teachers are paid under a complex and ever-shifting formula of base pay and bonuses called ProComp. While base teacher pay in Colorado ranks 30th in the nation, due to the high cost of living, Colorado teachers rank near last place compared to those paid similarly in less expensive areas. Denver teachers often work two or three jobs to pay their bills, and most cannot afford to live in the city.

During the current negotiations, the DCTA has already agreed to the board's proposal to raise the base pay of a first-year teacher from a miserable \$41,689 to a wholly inadequate \$45,000. A salary of \$68,436 would be required to qualify for a mortgage in Denver.

The union is asking for \$30 million in new money to fund teacher salaries, while it claims the district is offering only \$4 million in new funds for pay, and the two sides are far apart on base pay vs. pay-for-performance. The ProComp contract relies heavily on compensating teachers based on test scores and teacher evaluations, a process despised by teachers in many school districts throughout the United States.

A ballot proposal was put forward last November to create a "Quality Public Education Fund." The measure would have introduced a graduated tax structure, increasing taxes on individuals earning over \$150,000 per year, and on businesses. The measure failed by 53.64 percent to 46.36 percent and was predictably opposed by Ready Colorado and other big business pro-voucher, pro-charter organizations.

As the November elections and various state proposals indicated, the stranglehold of the two capitalist political parties will not be broken through the ballot box. The issues facing teachers in Denver are no different than those faced by teachers in Los Angeles or Oakland, California. The NEA and the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) have worked assiduously since last February to divide and stifle every struggle of educators as they emerged. Teachers need to reject these divisive policies and build independent rank-and-file committees to unite with all other sections of workers now coming into struggle.



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