

Virginia and Denver teachers set to strike as educators struggles continue to spread

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Teachers across the US continue to press their fight in defense of public education in the face of open sabotage by the unions. The United Teachers of Los Angeles on Wednesday precipitously shut down the powerful six-day walkout by teachers with the claims—widely disputed by educators—that a tentative agreement had been ratified and that it was a “victory.”

This betrayal comes as additional contingents of educators in many states are clamoring to join in the fight for full funding for their schools and, by implication, pushing for national action. Teachers are demanding a fight against the decades-long assault on public education and instinctively seeking a means to halt the unions’ continual efforts to smother their struggles.

Thousands of Virginia teachers are expected to walk out on Monday, January 28 and travel across the state to protest at the capitol in Richmond to further their fight for K-12 funding. In a vote over the past few days Denver educators have voted by a 93 percent margin to strike. They may also walk out next Monday.

Wright State University faculty in Dayton, Ohio are currently on the picket lines. On February 4, 2,000 City College of Chicago faculty and staff are set to walk. And Oakland, California teachers have staged two “sickouts” and could strike at any time.

Teachers are entering into struggle after decades of bipartisan defunding of public schools, accompanied by the deliberate promotion of privatization and charter schools. During this period the unions have proven themselves willing partners in every assault so long as their dues-stream is protected.

As a new round of struggle ensues, teachers should forearm themselves by studying the lessons of the UTLA struggle and the teachers’ rebellions of 2018. Teachers should take up the fight for independent rank and file committees in every neighborhood and school to prosecute a genuine national offensive for education.

Virginia

Virginia educators will conduct a mile-long march and rally in Richmond to protest some of the most inequitably funded schools in the United States. Students in the wealthy districts of Virginia receive eight percent more funding per student than do students in economically depressed areas creating palpable economic segregation.

By taking the one-day action, teachers are defying anti-strike legislation in the state which is home to the national headquarters of the notorious Right-To-Work Foundation.

While Virginia’s median income is \$71,535, over \$11,000 higher than the national average, the median income for teachers is \$20,000 lower at \$51,049. This is \$8,000 below even the national average for teachers. Unsurprisingly, large numbers of teachers have found themselves unable to afford even basic necessities.

Sarah Pedersen, a sixth-grade history teacher, wrote in Richmond 2Day that, with “Sisyphus-like” student loans, hospital bills, and living expenses, she struggles to afford diapers for her one-year-old baby.

Pedersen is a dedicated teacher who has taught for eight years; she proudly describes how she is a seventh-generation public school teacher. Her stagnant salary, however, is not enough to pay off the loans she took for her education and support her family in a state where living expenses continue to soar. This will be her last year teaching in Virginia.

Another teacher, Christian Peabody, an elementary school music teacher, posted a video on Facebook, in which he holds up a thermometer; the temperature inside of his home was 25 degrees Fahrenheit. Although he has given up wifi and cable television, he still cannot afford to heat his home. He has not been able to turn his heat on since December.

In the wake of the 2008 recession, cuts to Virginia’s education budget totaled over \$1 billion. In the 2016-2017 school year, the last year for which numbers were aggregated, there were at least 1,000 vacancies for teachers statewide. At the same time, K-12 enrollment has increased

by 50,000. Clearly these numbers translate into overcrowded classrooms.

Conditions have deteriorated to the point that many schools in predominantly poor, working class areas are now failing state accreditation. Moreover, 60 percent of Virginia's school buildings are over 40 years old. Many buildings are even older and are plagued with unreliable heating and cooling systems.

However, fresh from torpedoing the teachers' strike in Los Angeles, both American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten and National Educators Association (NEA) president Lily Eskelsen Garcia are flying into Richmond next Monday. Their purpose has little to do with speechifying, but everything to do with trying to keep a lid on the explosive anger of Virginia teachers.

The rally's organizers, the ostensibly independent Facebook group Virginia Educators United (VEU), seem prepared to reprise the rotten role of #Red4Ed in Arizona and Oklahoma last year when such Facebook groups enforced the shutdown of strikes in service to the unions and Democratic Party politicians.

Already the VEU has, in partnership with the AFT and NEA, made known their opposition to an open-ended strike. On the contrary, because Governor Northam is a Democrat, VEU stated very early on that a strike would "be unfair" to Northam. Successive Virginia state governments, including the previous Democratic administration of Terry R. McAuliffe in which Northam served as lieutenant governor, have refused to adequately fund public schools.

Denver

If Denver teachers walk out on Monday as planned, it will be the first strike in the district since 1994. The Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) encompasses 5,635 educators in the Denver Public Schools (DPS) system which serves 71,000 children. The 100 school nurses in the district have pledged to join teachers, who have been in contract negotiations for over two years.

The district continues to refuse to budge on teachers' salary demands and has pledged to stay open, hiring substitute teachers at double the normal pay and attending job fairs in order to recruit furloughed federal workers as strikebreakers. DPS superintendent Susana Cordova met with newly-installed Democratic Governor Jared Polis Wednesday night and has formally requested the state's Department of Labor and Employment intervene to prevent a strike.

Polis, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, was the wealthiest Democrat in Congress in 2016. He earned his "education credentials" co-introducing Obama's pro-privatization legislation Race to the Top (with Joe Lieberman) and establishing the New American School, a charter school chain, as well as an urban charter in Denver, the Academy of Urban Learning. Nonetheless, he was endorsed by the teachers' union.

At issue in Denver is a combination of low base pay for teachers and "market incentives" enshrined in a series of bonuses called ProComp. This hated system was devised with the help of the union itself, alongside Colorado Democrat and educational "reformer" Sen. Michael Bennet.

According to the *Huffington Post*, "His [Bennet's] multi-million dollar experiments helped form the basis of Arne Duncan's multi-billion dollar debacles, such as the RttT [Race to the Top], the SIG [School Improvement Grants], and 'incentivizing' states to incorporate test score growth into teacher evaluations."

Both "blue" Colorado and "purple" Virginia (the governor is a Democrat, the state legislature long under Republican control) face strikes on the same day over the same issues. This underscores the fact that no matter which big business party dominates the legislature or occupies the governor's chair, educators face the same political struggle; both capitalist political parties are equally hostile to the social right of the working class to high-quality public education and are equally invested in Wall Street profiteering on the backs of workers and their children.

Years of drastic cuts to education has proven that the unions seek nothing more than ensuring their institutional relationships and dues income, no matter how many concessions, cutbacks and impossible living conditions are inflicted on teachers.

Teachers now coming into struggle should take heed of the events of the last year. In order for their demands to be realized, they must take their struggle out of the hands of the labor police of the NEA and AFT as well as the pseudo-left apologists who orbit the unions like the VEU. Instead, teachers must connect and coordinate their struggles through the formation of independent rank and file organizations which link up the fight for fully funded, high quality public education with the many struggles of workers and young people nationally and internationally.



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