

# Colorado Labor Department blocks Denver teachers' strike

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The strike by Denver teachers initially set to begin today has been called off following intervention by the Colorado Labor and Employment Department at the request of the Denver Public Schools (DPS). On Tuesday, teachers authorized a strike by a 93 percent margin, after over a year of failed negotiations. Students supporting their teachers had been planning sit-ins today at a number of schools.

On Wednesday, DPS Superintendent Susana Cordova petitioned the state government to intervene. The Colorado Labor Department can hold up the strike for as long as 24 days—up to 10 days for the union to respond and up to 14 days for the state to decide. Then if it chooses to attempt to broker a deal, a strike could legally be delayed for up to six months.

The Denver Classroom Teachers Association acceded to the process, with union president Henry Roman telling the media, “The district needs to have a serious commitment to come to the table with more funding. As soon as they are willing to bargain and put more money on the table, we’re ready.” Newly-elected Democratic Governor Jared Polis, an advocate of charter schools and multi-millionaire endorsed by the DCTA, signaled his agreement with the intervention and offered to “help” with negotiations.

In response to these maneuvers, a crowd of angry educators, joined by supportive parents and students, held an animated protest at the Denver Public Schools board meeting on Thursday. After chanting and marching outside the building, teachers and parents from across the city assembled inside the crowded board meeting and displayed their opposition to decades of deep cuts carried out by the state government. Teachers and students loudly proclaimed their support for a strike and bitterly denounced the criminally low pay of school staff and the general lack

of funding for education.

DPS teacher Ryan said, “My salary doesn’t cover my student loans, my living expenses, and I now can’t afford groceries,” according to Colorado Public Radio. Ryan stated that she had to use a food bank to provide food for herself and her three children. Speaking to members of the school board, she said, “So, if you guys want to look me in the eye tonight, do me a favor. Look me in the eye, tell me why it is OK that you guys have all this money that you put in in central administration and I can’t feed my children.”

Also speaking to CPR reporters, Anna Noble, a teacher at East High School in Denver, said, “We’ve been bargaining for 15 months. We don’t need to have more meetings. We need a decision and we need it now.”

Facing the angry crowd, several members of the school board cited the fact that the state legislature has withheld \$750 million in funding for public schools since 2008. At the same time, the school administration under newly-installed superintendent Susana Cordova has made it clear that they intend any and all measures to enforce continued poverty wages on teachers. In the lead-up to the proposed strike, DPS had informed its headquarters administration staff that it would be expected to scab or lose their jobs, and the district actively sought to recruit furloughed federal workers as strikebreakers.

In a particularly vicious move of intimidation, DPS circulated a warning to immigrant teachers that their legal residency status could be revoked and they could face deportation if they participated in the strike. Marisol Calderon, a teacher at Farrell B. Howell school, told the Denver Post that several immigrant teachers at the school, including one who is Venezuelan and seeking asylum and another who is set to become a

naturalized US citizen, called the act of intimidation “appalling and discouraging.”

DPS later offered a half-hearted apology for sending out the letter, stating that it “was the result of a misinterpretation of the information that we received from our immigration firm.”

The central demand of teachers is increased base pay. Since 2005, the district has utilized ProComp, a pay-for-performance system which sets base salaries at an impossibly low \$41,689, supplemented with a smattering of “performance incentives” tied to higher student tests scores and other bonuses.

This reactionary system was developed with DCTA support. It was implemented as part of the general attack on public education—in particular the Obama administrations’ promotion of “standardized testing” under the initiative Race to the Top. The scheme not only impoverishes teachers and promotes punitive tests, but it underwrites the privatization of education by labeling schools as “failing” so they can be shut down and turned into charters. According to numerous reports, Colorado consistently ranks in the bottom tier of US states for both education funding and teacher salaries.



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