

Striking Denver teachers speak out

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Teachers in Denver, Colorado are continuing their strike over merit pay and the chronic underfunding of the school system by city and state Democratic Party officials. There is broad support among students and parents for the strike, with many students walking out of school to join the picket lines and protests by their teachers.

As the hundreds of teachers marched the mile to Civic Center Park, near the State Capitol Building, cars honked, and people came out of the neighborhoods and stores to support them. Teachers and students spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the “pay-for-performance” ProComp scheme that ties teachers’ compensation to standardized test scores and other measurements largely determined by poverty, school defunding and other social ills, which teachers have no control over. In addition to scapegoating teachers for these conditions, the arbitrary character of the merit pay system has left teachers unsure of their actual income from month-to-month.

“I’ve been working for DPS (Denver Public Schools) for 12 years and I’ve been a teacher for 21 years, but I honestly have no idea how much money I make,” Ryan Short, a teacher at East High School, told the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*. “It varies every year and, yes, every month. It’s ProComp and the different bonuses that come and go. One year a bonus might be worth something, the next year it is worth nothing.

“We want salaries to be equitable for all teachers. We are asking for a transparent salary scale, higher base pay and incentive bonuses. We want it to be fair and predictable for all teachers. We all work hard. As a special education teacher, there’s no reason I should be paid an extra \$2,500 a year above the science teacher next to me. The money is not why I do what I do. We should raise the wages for everybody and make it fair for everybody, then turnover will be less, and student success will increase.

“I am married to a professional, we do OK, but I’m out here fighting for all the people I work with. Without a doubt, I’ve had friends come and go out of the profession just because they can’t afford it.

“There’s a movement across the country to honor teachers and pay them a professional wage. If you just pay people a fair base salary where they don’t have to worry about money, it will increase productivity and creativity.”

Asked what the low pay for teachers means for students’ educations, Ryan said: “When a teacher rushes out of the building at 3:15 to get to their second job and works to 9:30 or 10 at night, yes, students suffer. When teachers are working 18-hour days, it definitely affects students.”

Abbey Ashby, a third-year math teacher in her first year at DPS, said, “I’m striking because the bonuses we receive disrupt our classrooms. I work in a ‘high priority’ [high poverty] classroom so despite the incentives, our middle school students only kept two of their teachers last year. My eighth grade students had so many math teachers last year.

“Since the incentives are unreliable, many teachers have taken significant pay cuts from year to year. Some teachers tell me they make less now than two years ago.

“I have no idea what my paycheck will be. This is my first year and every time I get it, I am completely confused. I don’t know if I’m getting all the right money for incentives.

“I live in 800-square feet with three adults, that’s what we can afford. I make about \$42,000 a year. I rent because I could never afford a house or be approved for a loan. If I were to apply for a mortgage, incentives would not be considered to qualify for a mortgage.

“We’re not eating great, we’re eating the same couple of things every day. It’s okay, my partner is on food stamps, so that helps. As I told my students, from month to month I have to choose between buying

snacks or school supplies for them in the classroom, or things for myself, like hygiene products. I'd like to be able to afford both things for my students and for myself."

Another educator Jennifer, said: "Every year is different, as to what my bonus is going to be, or even when we're going to be paid for the bonuses. One year the bonus was only paid in December. I can afford to live in Denver only because my parents help me."

Asked about the role of the Democrats in supporting accountability schemes like ProComp, Jennifer said: "I think the Democratic Party is just as much a party of the establishment as any other. I was a Democrat for a month to caucus for Bernie. I left when they screwed him over. I'm independent now, probably for life. If the Democrats don't become more progressive, they're going to die, just like the Republicans are."

Another teacher, Joe Walden, told the WSWS: "We have been working on this for years in terms of ProComp. One of our messages is that incentives don't work. We need a good starting salary and a reasonable plan to build that salary over the course of our careers. A sticking point is the role of professional development; the administration makes it an impossible hoop to jump through.

"We have a general idea of how much money we make each month, but we don't know what is going to be incentivized each year. This year we got one for growth in test scores; we received \$1,000. Last year, it was close to \$2,400. It's announced about three weeks before you get it.

"We all love our children, we love our students. Paying us more bonuses doesn't make us work harder. We believe in the future and want to have an impact on that future."

Two George Washington High School students, Rebekah Wilson and Cathryn Seaman, also spoke with the WSWS. Rebekah said: "I'm out here because the teachers in DPS have done so much for me. They helped me bring my GPA up from 1.7 to 4.9. That wouldn't have been possible without the amazing teachers in my life.

"I have one teacher with four to five kids at home, and yet he's always at the school. They deserve more pay. They have families themselves and shouldn't be struggling to have food on the table. One of my teacher's husband had no pay because of the

government shutdown too."

Cathryn Seaman, added, "My teachers work really hard. They are always there to support us. They do a lot of work outside the classroom and shouldn't have to work second jobs. They work every day to make sure we are learning, are safe and comfortable in school. They deserve to get decent wages."



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