

Denver teachers battle merit-pay system that is backed by unions, Democratic Party

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Teachers in Denver, Colorado are continuing their strike over low pay and underfunding of the school system. According to the union, 3,800 of the district's 4,725 teachers are participating in the strike, which is the latest in a series of teacher walkouts extending across the United States since the spring of 2018.

Denver Public Schools (DPS), which serves 92,000 students and operates 207 schools, is attempting to keep the district running by putting administrators and substitute teachers in the classrooms. There is widespread support among students and parents for the DPS employees, who work in a state that ranks among the last in the nation in terms of teacher pay and live in a city where the median home price of \$421,000 is double the national average.

Negotiations between DPS and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) resumed on Tuesday. DPS officials say their proposal to raise starting salaries to \$45,500 from their current level of \$43,255 is contingent on slashing other district jobs. School Superintendent Susana Cordova says 150 jobs would have to be eliminated from the district's central office and has claimed that no support staff and janitors will be affected. Not only are such promises dubious, but the cutting of central office staff has often been the prelude to the restructuring of school districts and the expansion of charter schools and other school privatization schemes.

The DCTA, which was forced to call the strike because of overwhelming anger among teachers, is reportedly requesting a miserly \$300 in additional baseline compensation. The union, which kept teachers in the schools for 15 months after the expiration of their contract, is looking to end the walkout as quickly as possible.

Teachers in Denver are fighting powerful corporate and political forces, which have long promoted merit pay and other attacks on teachers and public education. That is why they must not fight this struggle alone. The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* urges teachers to elect rank-and-file strike committees at every school and in every neighborhood to mobilize the broadest support in the working class to back the teachers and to fight for the expansion of the strike throughout Colorado and beyond.

The control of the strike must be taken out of the hands of the

DCTA, which is allied with the very same Democratic Party politicians who claim that there is no money for improved wages and school funding, and who have spearheaded the attack on teachers and public education.

In Colorado, the central role in axing social spending and making the state one of the nation's most attractive for the wealthy has been played by the Democratic Party. With the exception of a two-term period from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, Democrats have controlled the governorship since 1974. Per pupil funding in Colorado for K-12 education is \$2,000 below the national average and places the state among the bottom third of all states for school financing.

Small increases in budget allocations for public education in recent years have been far outstripped by increasing numbers of students, declining local funding and growing costs facing schools. The state does not even provide a free full-day kindergarten education. Families are charged tuition based on a sliding scale, with the maximum rate being upwards of \$2,500 for the school year. Colorado's current governor, Democrat Jared Polis, is a founder and advocate of charter schools. In May, the state's previous Democratic governor signed into law a massive attack on the pensions of teachers and other public sector workers.

At the center of teachers' demands is the overturning of Denver's merit pay system, ProComp. The "incentive-based" compensation program was designed and implemented in the mid-2000s as a joint initiative of the DPS and the union. As a substitute for raising teachers' base pay, the DPS and DCTA developed ProComp to award bonuses on the basis of student test scores, teacher evaluations, subject matter taught, the "high priority" character of the student population, labor market demands and a variety of other metrics.

The "merit" standards are so complex and change so much that educators say they cannot predict their monthly, much less annual, income. The scheme is also used on school psychologists, counselors, librarians and other staff.

Abbie Ashby, a first-year math teacher, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "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 8th

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. 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.”

The merit-based pay system was billed as a means to boost teacher retention and student performance. It has achieved neither of these. The achievement gap between poor and better-off students is one of the largest in the country, exceeded only by Washington, DC and Atlanta.

The overriding intent of the scheme is to scapegoat teachers for educational problems that are the inevitable product of poverty, social inequality and decades of defunding public education. One in five children in Denver lives below the government’s official poverty line and a third come from families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment. These figures underestimate the real scope of social suffering. According to Shift Research Lab, a family of four in Denver must make 3.4 times the federal poverty line to actually be self-sufficient.

By linking their compensation to conditions in the schools, the ProComp system makes teachers pay for the devastating fact that large numbers of their students are living in households that cannot pay for the basic necessities of life.

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The origins of Denver’s merit-based pay system can be traced back to the work of the National Commission on Teachers and America’s Future (NCTAF), headed by Democrat Jim Hunt (governor of North Carolina) and Linda Darling-Hammond. The latter served as an education advisor to Barack Obama and was considered for education secretary until Obama chose Arne Duncan, another proponent of corporate-backed “school reform.”

In 1996, the NCTAF published a report titled “What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future,” which advocated merit pay in the educational system. The agenda contained in this report was picked up by DPS, the DCTA and the Rose Community Foundation, which worked to institute a pilot ProComp program in Denver in 1999.

The “pay-for-performance” (PFP) model got a further boost in 2000 and 2003 from the right-wing scholar Edward Lazear, who would go on to serve as the chief economic adviser to George W. Bush from 2006 to 2009. On the basis of data showing that a pay-per-item compensation model (in other words, piece rate) at Safelite Autoglass had significantly increased worker output and profits, the Stanford University professor argued that teachers should be subject to a similar “motivational” pay system.

The efforts in Denver caught the attention of other big donors, such as Eli Broad, a multibillionaire promoter of privatizing public schools. In 2005, a major campaign effort initiated by the DCTA and DPS, backed by the Democratic Party and financed by so-called “non-profits,” steamrolled voters into supporting a tax measure to fund ProComp. The tax measure promised an additional \$25 million for school financing as long as it was used to implement the merit pay system.

“Entrepreneurial behavior within the unions” and “unprecedented labor-management collaboration” were key to securing the “groundbreaking” initiative, according to the major book on ProComp, *Pay-for-Performance Teacher Compensation*, published in 2007.

In fighting against merit pay, low wages and the underfunding of schools, Denver teachers are in conflict with the trade unions and the Democratic Party. The DCTA has already made clear that it is merely requesting changes to the ProComp system, not its elimination. Similarly, the head of the National Education Association (NEA), Lily Eskelsen Garcia, declared that the biggest issue was the lack of clarity in the ProComp system, not the existence of merit pay itself. “You are unique here in Denver because here you are saying, ‘Can I just know what I’m being paid?’” she told a crowd of striking teachers outside the Capitol building on Monday.

Denver’s teachers’ strike is part of a broader struggle of educators throughout the United States and the world. Educators everywhere, and the students and communities they serve, are their allies, not the Democrats or trade union leaders of the DCTA, the NEA or the American Federation of Teachers. These forces have intervened systematically in strike after strike to isolate workers, shut down their struggle and force through concessions contracts. Only by taking the initiative in their own hands, through the formation of rank-and-file committees and linking up with educators and other workers across Colorado and beyond, can teachers mobilize the necessary support to wage this decisive battle.



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