

Union shuts down Denver teachers strike

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The WSWS Teacher Newsletter urges teachers in Denver to join us for a critical conference call Sunday, February 17, 4 p.m. Mountain time. Sign up here for information about participating in the call: <https://mailchi.mp/wsws/teachers-call-in>

Just three days after more than 3,800 Denver teachers went on strike, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) agreed to a deal early Thursday morning and instructed them to return to work before even voting on it. Like the previous deals signed by teacher union to end strikes, most recently in Los Angeles, the tentative agreement signed by the DCTA and Denver Public Schools (DPS) will pave the way for an escalation of the attacks on the jobs and conditions of teachers and the assault on public education.

The union presented the final draft of their proposal to the DPS at 5:30 am Thursday after negotiating most of the night and morning. It was reviewed for 25 minutes and signed by both parties. Demonstrating their contempt for the democratic rights of teachers, DCTA and district officials told teachers to return to their classrooms or they would miss another day of pay. There is nothing in the new agreement about class sizes, tenure rights, school funding, or the expansion of charter schools.

Teachers, who still must ratify the tentative agreement, should reject DCTA's deal and organize rank-and-file committees of teachers, school workers and students to put forth demands for the benefit of students and educators. These committees must begin with their needs and the needs of their students, not with what the corporate-controlled politicians claim they can afford. At the same time, Denver teachers must link up with educators and broader sections of workers throughout the US and internationally to fight austerity and social inequality.

The union's sudden deal left teachers confused on whether or not they should return to work. Teachers

stayed up all night watching union and district officials negotiate on a live stream that reveals only the "highlights" of the proposal.

"I am really bothered by the fact that it was announced 15 minutes before I'd have to leave to work that in order to get paid today, I had to attend work," a Denver teacher, Dana, posted on the Facebook page Fair Pay for Denver Teachers. "Many teachers were up all night watching bargaining, and that does not seem appropriate."

Jozi added, "The point that teachers returned to work without ratifying is a sound concern especially given the bad faith tactics that the district has pulled over the last 15 months."

A central demand for the teachers, who struck for the first time in 25 years, was overturning the merit-based pay system, ProComp. The pay-for-performance system, modeled on piece work rate at the Safelite auto glass repair company, was set in place in 2006 by the DCTA and then-Superintendent Michael Bennet, who is now a US Senator for Colorado. The scheme was designed to keep base pay low and essentially use standardized testing and other punitive evaluation methods to punish teachers for educational problems largely determined by social factors such as poverty, lack of school funding, food insecurity and other social ills.

In the current deal, the union did not eradicate the system but agreed to an "amended" ProComp with a complex tiered system of pay based on experience and academic degrees, teacher evaluations based on test scores, potentially biased student and fellow teacher reviews, incentives for working in high-poverty schools and "hard-to-fill positions" and the willingness of teachers to labor extra hours beyond their exhausting work schedules to earn so-called Professional Development Units (PDUs). The only increase in base pay ranged from 7 to 11 percent in the next school year

and increases at or below the inflation rate the following two years.

"This agreement is a win, plain and simple: for our students, for our educators, and for our communities," DCTA President Henry Roman said. "No longer will our students see their education disrupted because their teachers cannot afford to stay in their classrooms."

This is false. Teachers will continue to struggle with low pay. A report by the Education Law Center and the Rutgers Graduate School of Education last year ranked the state last in the nation in competitive wages for teachers. Denver is one of the most expensive cities in the United States, with a median house price of \$450,100. A family of four in Denver would have to make 3.4 times the federal poverty level of \$25,100 for a family of four—or \$85,340—to be self-sufficient. The starting salary of a teacher with a Bachelor's Degree will be \$45,800, and a teacher would have to have Master's Degree plus 20 years of service to approach the self-sufficiency threshold.

Colorado's Democratic governor, Jared Polis, who closely monitored the strike, praised the DCTA and claimed that "Denver's kids are the biggest winners in today's agreement."

Like state governments in California, Washington state, New York and other states, the Democratic Party-controlled state government in Colorado has been systematically defunding public education and promoting the expansion of charter schools and other privatization schemes. While claiming that there is no money for improved school funding and teacher salaries, the Democrats, like their Republican counterparts, have handed billions in tax cuts and other incentives to big business and wealthy individuals.

A key element in the lack of funding rests with Colorado's Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR), a 1992 constitutional amendment that heavily limits state and municipal governments' ability to fund social services. Under TABOR, state and local governments cannot raise tax rates without voter approval and cannot spend revenues collected under existing tax rates without voter approval if revenues grow faster than the rate of inflation and population growth.

The unions and the Democrats have consistently pushed regressive measures to fund public education, which shift the burden of taxation onto working-class and middle-class people least able to pay. The Colorado

Education Association and Denver Classroom Teachers Association told teachers that more money would be available to improve pay if a tax measure was passed in November, but it was defeated by voters.

The proposal being forced on Denver teachers places them in direct conflict with the unions, and Democrat-controlled local and state governments. The DCTA is following the path set forth by the various teachers' unions in the strikes within the past year by concluding deals that fail to resolve any issues set forth and muffling the strike.

The biggest obstacle to a unified fight back by teachers has been the unions. Within the last year, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, which the DCTA is associated with, have done everything in their power to suppress, isolate and weaken the growing demands of teachers across the country. The national unions have shut down each struggle before teachers in another state could join them on the picket lines. The DCTA kept teachers on the job for 15 months without a new contract—while teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states were on strike. It finally called the strike, three weeks after the United Teachers Los Angeles sold out the strike by LA teachers. Then the DCTA reached an agreement just days before teachers in Oakland, California are set to strike. This underscores the need for rank-and-file teachers to take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands.



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