

Denver schools ax jobs in wake of contract pushed through by union

Andrea Peters
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Dozens of educators and other critical support staff are being laid off by the Denver Public Schools (DPS), in the wake of the approval of a sell-out contract agreed to by the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA). The layoffs target educational technology teams, literacy support staff, and math specialists who work with high-need students, among others. The DPS reports it will save upwards of \$17 million in labor costs with these cuts.

In their first strike in over 25 years, Denver teachers walked out February 11-13 over low pay, underfunding of the schools, and the “incentive-based” compensation system known as ProComp. Seventy-five percent of the district’s educators—20 percentage points more than initially reported by DPS—walked out, with the widespread support of parents and students.

After just three days on the picket line, the DCTA sent teachers back to work with about two hours’ notice, claiming that it had won a major victory. This follows the pattern throughout the past year, as the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, to which the DCTA is affiliated, have isolated and smothered every teachers’ strike precisely when new struggles threatened to break out. West Virginia teachers walked out February 19, followed by Oakland teachers February 21.

Far from being, as claimed by the DCTA, a “win, plain and simple,” the new agreement secures minimal pay increases for teachers while sacrificing the wages and promotion opportunities of school psychologists, nurses, speech pathologists, and others classified as School Service Providers (SSPs). The entire deal is predicated upon the extension of ProComp. It was worked out in a secret bargaining session organized with the specific purpose of doing an end-run around a law requiring such negotiations to be public.

Last week, the DCTA declared the membership ratified the agreement by 97 percent, providing no information about the vote turnout. There is every reason to be highly skeptical of the union’s claim of overwhelming support for the deal. Opposition to the contract was growing among the membership, as frustration over the paltry pay increases grew and details of the wage cuts hitting SSPs became more widely known.

A lie, peddled by the DPS and DCTA, was key to securing whatever support there was for the contract among teachers. School Superintendent Susana Cordova claimed that the money to finance the contract would come from cutting 150 non-essential administrative positions—in other words, jobs that do not directly provide fundamental and necessary services for students or teachers. The district said it would only seek \$7 million in labor cost savings.

The truth is now rapidly making itself clear. The DPS is using the contract to implement a broader restructuring that, although announced on March 1, has clearly been long-planned. Workers in the central office, many with teaching licenses and decades of experience, are losing their jobs. DPS is recouping \$17 million—not \$7 million—in labor costs. Highly paid administrators are being protected and promoted.

“Today my former colleagues, the entire DPS Ed tech team lost their jobs as their department was cut by the superintendent as part of the district office budget cuts. Seventeen hard-working former educators (some in the district for over 20 years) working in schools with teachers across the district, coaching digital integration in the classroom, supporting schools with 1:1 programs, and facilitating taxpayer funded initiatives that help prepare DPS students to be college and career-ready 21st century citizens,” reported one Denver teacher on

Facebook.

“Our literacy partner was fired today and she’s done more for our school than anyone else downtown!” wrote another.

The district’s Math Fellows, teachers who work in small groups of especially high-need students, were called into a previously unannounced meeting late last week to receive news that their positions are being axed.

The “Imaginarium,” a special program providing funding and resources for teachers and students to experiment with new learning strategies, is being cut.

“There are real reductions, real elimination of services,” declared Superintendent Cordova on March 1. Having lied to teachers about her plans during the strike, she then added, “I don’t want to pretend or be coy.”

These cuts come alongside promotions for high-up administrators. The former head of DPS Human Resources, Debbie Hearty, who threatened to inform the federal government about immigrant teachers on strike, has been made deputy superintendent.

In addition to making educators pay for any minimal salary hikes they receive, the DPS is working to deepen the crisis in the city’s public schools. The aim is lay the groundwork for more charter schools on the basis of the claim that public institutions and teachers are failing students. Eliminating essential services like educational technology support and literacy and math specialists sets up schools for disaster.

The DCTA has said nothing about the central office jobs cuts. Undoubtedly, it knew about them. The plans were part of the closed-door negotiations with the DPS. The day after the union shut down the strike, DCTA lead negotiator Robert Gould gloated about keeping teachers in the dark as to what was agreed on. “What happened in that room stays in that room,” he said.

The DCTA hid the details about these job cuts from its membership because it knew teachers would be outraged and reject a contract that cut essential services for students. It feared it would lose control of the strike, which was part of a larger wave of labor action by educators around the country incensed over decades of underfunding for public schools.

The job losses being imposed in Denver schools underscore the necessity of teachers forming rank-and-file committees outside of and opposed to the unions.

These committees should organize a resumption of the strike and link the struggle with that of educators across the United States and around the world. The defense of public education is only possible on the basis of intransigent opposition to the profit system and the claim that schooling must be subordinated to the economic, political, and social interests of big business.



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