

Schools begin in Denver amid sweltering heat and ongoing protests

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Denver public school teachers, faculty, students and parents are protesting impossible learning conditions at local schools, as scorching heat broke local records. Sixty older Denver Public Schools (DPS) buildings, out of 207, have no air conditioning.

The school year start dates have been set earlier and earlier, as school administrators demand increased preparation for standardized tests. This year, students were in their seats on August 19—when temperatures hit nearly 100 degrees in some parts of Denver.

On Monday August 26, about 50 protesters sat-in at the Denver Public School Administrative building. Organizers described conditions in the buildings as unhealthy, even dangerous. Students are lethargic, distracted and sick, they reported. “It’s absolutely brutal,” teacher Lisa Yemma told Denver7 TV news. She told the media she is running her classroom’s window box fan continuously, but asked, “How can we create a safe learning environment for our students so that we’re not all sweating and we can actually focus?”

“Teachers that I’ve talked to have said they’ve seen kids drip sweat onto their papers,” said Amy Duclos, a parent of a DPS student, according to Denver7. “The kids are getting headaches, getting nauseous. My daughter said one kid actually vomited in class. If this is what’s happening on these hotter days, then I don’t know if we’re fulfilling the mission of educating our children.” Duclos and other parents traveled to DPS schools delivering thermometers and fans.

The administration was roundly denounced for its double standard, as \$4.2 million in bond and mill levy money was recently approved to upgrade the Denver Public Schools administration building. Only three of the 60 schools without air conditioners are scheduled for that upgrade some time in 2020.

For their part, the DPS administration said that

adding air conditioning or heat mitigation in older buildings was too expensive. “If we were to look at doing that—about \$200 million,” said DPS Deputy Superintendent of Operations Mark Ferrandino. “Three to four million dollars for air conditioning per school.” Instead, DPS spokesperson Will Jones said they are encouraging building managers to keep windows open at night.

Denver Schools superintendent Susana Cordova also evinced little sympathy for students or teachers, emphasizing there were “little things we can do to lower temperatures ... like turning off monitors on computers.”

In February, Denver teachers mounted the first strike against the district since 1994. During the course of the strike, Cordova gained national notoriety by viciously threatening to report any immigrant teachers who struck to Homeland Security alongside advertising for strikebreakers among furloughed federal workers. In the final deal, she kept Denver educators near the bottom of the US in pay, cut other vital school workers’ wages and took a hard line requiring the expansion of merit pay (ProComp).

The current protest, while more than justified, was promoted by a faction of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) called Caucus of Today’s Teachers. One of their members, Tiffany Choi, is running for union president and was prominently featured. While criticizing the inhumane lack of air conditioning for students, Choi suggested not a single programmatic demand.

For good reason—the state of Denver schools is, in no small part, the end product of long years of collaboration of the DCTA with the Democratic politicians who have systematically de-funded education. Specifically, Choi was on the DCTA board

of directors for the past two years and assisted the union in pushing through the betrayal of the powerful strike last February 11-13.

At that time, the DCTA conspired secretly with district officials (in violation of legal requirements to livestream negotiations), abandoned the fight for decent wages and allowed ProComp to stand. They contemptuously then ordered teachers to return to their classrooms with less than two hours' notice. In the aftermath of the strike, dozens of educators and other critical support staff were axed while others had their pay cut. Choi hailed the DCTA negotiators, claiming, "we won the strike."

While endorsing the betrayal of the strike, Choi casts herself as a "social justice" "equity-focused" unionist in the treacherous model of the Chicago teachers union and its pseudo-left Caucus of Rank and File Educators. The Caucus of Today's Teachers follows the pattern of the entire pseudo-left, including the Democratic Socialists of America, the now-defunct International Socialist Organization and Socialist Alternative, in promoting racist policies. Dividing teachers, parents and students along the lines of race, these outfits cover over the systematic cuts to schools, the role of the unions and of the Democratic Party.

Here, Choi finds herself in the company of superintendent Susana Cordova, who similarly covers herself and her pro-privatization agenda with "equity" initiatives like the "Black and Latino Male Achievement" program and Latinx groups. In the calculations of many administrators, including Cordova, such programs assist in preventing the unity of the working class and typically cost next to nothing. Moreover, they are fully compatible with the growth of charters and other edubusiness operations.

After years of Democratic Party dominance, endorsed every step of the way by the DCTA, the Colorado public school system is now one of the most underfunded public school systems in the country. According to the Education Law Center and the Rutgers Graduate School of Education report, issued last year, the state ranks last in the nation in competitive wages for teachers.

The hated ProComp pay-for-performance system—implemented in line with the Obama administration's promotion of standardized testing and charter schools through Race to the Top—was modeled

on a piece-work rate originally designed by the Safelite auto glass repair company. It was set in place jointly by the DCTA and then-Superintendent (and now Democratic US Senator) Michael Bennet in 2006.

This assault on teachers was further magnified when then-governor Democrat John Hickenlooper (a recent drop-out from the presidential race for 2020) signed into law sweeping cuts to teacher and public employee pensions in 2018. The measure raised retirement age from 58 to 64 for future teachers and forced current educators to contribute an extra 2 percent of their salaries towards retirement.

To take the fight of Denver teachers and students forward, a complete break with the DCTA, the Democratic Party and careerists like Choi is required. The WSWs Teacher Newsletter urges teachers to organize rank and file school and neighborhood committees and advance a socialist program in defense of public education. We urge teachers to read our statement and contact us at [WSWS.org/teachers](https://wsws.org/teachers).



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