

Teachers in rural Colorado strike over low pay

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Teacher's working in Colorado's Park County School District RE-2 began to strike on Monday, October 14, following a breakdown in negotiations between school officials and the South Park Education Association (SPEA), the local teachers union.

The action by educators in Park County, which is about a two-hour drive southwest of Denver, follows three recent teacher strikes in Colorado and mass walkouts in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, California, and elsewhere over the past two years. Teachers in Chicago began a strike yesterday.

Park County teachers' previous contract expired in August. Despite this, the SPEA kept teachers on the job for another two months.

Low wages and the school district's refusal to include salary in collective bargaining agreements are at the heart of the strike. As has occurred in the past, the district is insisting that pay bands be kept separate from the contract, thereby creating a second level of negotiations over the most important aspect of teacher compensation.

Furthermore, whatever pay scale is agreed to is then subject to "local control," which grants each school system within the district wide latitude in determining individual teachers' salaries.

The pay bands, agreed to separately from the contract, are abysmally low. A new teacher with limited experience would be expected to begin at level one, about \$30,770 a year. And a teacher coming into the district with 12-years' experience would start at level 10, around \$37,070.

Renting a one-bedroom residence in the area costs approximately \$1,200 a month, and prices are rising as people from the Denver area move to rural locales to find relatively cheaper housing.

The SPEA, knowing since August 23 that the district

would not discuss salaries prior to the reinstatement of an agreement that does not include pay levels, inserted the topic into the agenda for a meeting on October 10. When the topic of salaries came up, the SPEA walked out when the District refused to address the issue.

The SPEA's tactic of provoking a strike is aimed at defusing the anger of the teachers long enough to push through an agreement.

Both the Colorado Education Association, whose president earns upwards of \$300,000 a year, and the SPEA have been trying to get the rank-and-file to accept a six-percent across-the-board raise, amounting to an increase of about \$2,000 per year for most teachers. The teachers are demanding a \$4,000 salary increase for all district employees.

Park County is isolated along the northwest edge of a thousand-square-mile valley known as South Park. Fairplay, with about 750 residents, is the most populated city in the 2,000 square mile county.

Little job security exists outside of agriculture, the source of most of the county's taxes, followed by the building trades. The school district is the fourth largest employer in the area.

Throughout Colorado, where the minimum wage is just \$10.20, low pay for teachers and spiraling living costs are driving educators to seek new jobs. An August 2019 study funded by the Institute of Education Sciences of the US Department of Education found that nearly 20 percent of Colorado teachers in 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 moved schools within a district or left a district altogether in a search of higher salaries.

The Colorado legislature, dominated by Democrats, continues to strip funds from the state's education budget in an effort to comply with the constitutionally mandated balanced budget requirement. Meanwhile, the state's wealthy benefit from a flat-rate income tax

of 4.63 percent.



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