

Colorado high school lays off all teachers, tells them to reapply for their own jobs

Tony Jackson, John Butcher
12 April 2021

The Southwest Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding its next meeting this Saturday, April 17, at 12pm MT. We will discuss the mass layoff of teachers at Mitchell High School in Colorado and the broader situation facing educators in the US, charting a fighting strategy in defense of public education. Register today and invite your coworkers and friends!

Dozens of teachers at Mitchell High School in Colorado Springs, CO, a city of just over 460,000 on the eastern foot of the Rocky Mountains, were informed in January by the District 11 Board of Education that they will be laid off at the end of the school year and forced to re-apply for their jobs. In response, the union which claims to represent educators, the Colorado Springs Education Association (CSEA), has simply told its membership to look for new jobs in nearby districts, as no timeline has been given for the reposting of the Mitchell High School positions.

School officials maintain that they have the right to carry out the mass firing because they must “implement comprehensive changes” that will address the fact that students have been performing poorly on standardized tests for four years and the school has been placed on “performance watch.”

An additional pretext for the firings stems from alleged concerns over low participation among Mitchell High School students for the SAT, an unmandated, non-state exam for college admissions that institutions of higher education are increasingly waiving as an entrance requirement. Because state-required standardized exams have been suspended across Colorado due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city’s school board is seizing upon the SAT participation rate to carry out its attack.

While many districts and states use tests like the SAT as a supplement to other methods of evaluating students, it is widely known that results are highly linked to students’ socioeconomic background because the exam can only be

mastered through expensive private tutoring programs or academic coaches.

Mitchell High School serves a low-income, highly transient population. A third of its students come from Spanish-speaking homes, and one in every five is enrolled in English-language-learning classes. Many students are either undocumented or moving in and out of the district as their parents follow seasonal and itinerant work opportunities. Both in terms of participation and performance, this student body is destined to “fail” compared to those from wealthier and more stable backgrounds.

The poverty and instability plaguing the students of Colorado Springs District 11 schools is not viewed by officials or the union bureaucracy as a social crisis that needs to be solved, but as an opportunity to attack public education. The effect of the mass teacher layoffs—which will cause many highly-skilled veteran educators to find work elsewhere—will be to intensify the feeling of vulnerability and crisis already plaguing young people as a result of the pandemic, which has infected more than 480,000 and killed 6,210 in the state. The teacher turnover rate—already high because of the difficult conditions at Mitchell High School—will rise further, deepening the educational crisis facing these students.

This is the start, not the end of the assault. The school administration’s logic is easy to suss out: create unstable working conditions that drive away the most experienced teachers and then use the predictably poor student results from the following academic year as justification for more drastic measures.

For some time, school officials have been working to get Mitchell High School classified as an “innovation school.” This is a unique legal category for struggling institutions that exempts them from certain state laws and labor agreements typical of public schools. Charter schools seeking to profit in the wake of shuttered public

schools are the most typical beneficiaries of this label, which permits the hiring of uncertified teachers and the payment of salaries below district standards.

Should Mitchell High School get its classification as an “innovation school,” the at-will hiring and firing of teachers and staff will become the norm. District 11 has long sought the “innovation school” title, with school officials voting just this past year to adopt the designation but the vote failing by one. Regardless, the superintendent announced some months later that he was going forward with the plan to convert Mitchell into an “innovation school.”

Teachers in the district see the move as part of an effort to privatize or semi-privatize the schools, forcing new policies and initiatives upon a cohort of inexperienced, under-prepared, and vulnerable teachers. Under the name of “progress” and “improvement,” education for the neediest will be destroyed and a profit-oriented model imposed.

This assault on teachers in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic is not limited to Colorado Springs. In Arizona, Gilbert Public Schools recently laid off 152 faculty and paraprofessional staff because of “declining student enrollment.” More broadly, the social crisis found in Mitchell High School exists across the country.

The fight to defend public education cannot be carried forward by the trade unions. The failure and refusal of the CSEA, as well as its parent unions at the state and national level, to oppose the mass layoff of teachers in the city and across the US expresses the real relationship of these organizations to the workers they allegedly represent. The fight to defend jobs, the welfare of students, and public education as a whole can only be waged and won by educators themselves. We call on all teachers in Colorado and throughout the rest of the Southwest region to join and build rank-and-file committees of educators today to wage a determined struggle in defense of public education!



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact