

Columbus, Ohio public school teachers poised to strike

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The Columbus Education Association (CEA) on Thursday issued a 10-day strike notice for 4,500 Columbus City Schools teachers and staff. More than 2,500 teachers attended a membership meeting that evening, an indication of the degree of anger felt by teachers towards the district's "final offer."

The potential strike is the latest sign of major opposition building among workers in the country's education system. More than two years into the pandemic, schools are once again poised to reopen for the fall semester with no meaningful COVID protections in place, leading to mass infections and death. Franklin County, where Columbus is located, has reported some of the highest COVID-19 rates in the state throughout the pandemic.

In Niles, Ohio, in the eastern portion of the state, 151 teachers have also voted to strike beginning September 1. About 100 teachers attended the July 28 school board meeting holding signs pointing to the low pay and lack of staff faced by teachers.

The strike notice also comes after thousands of Columbus-area Kroger workers rejected a sellout contract brought to them by the United Food and Commercial Workers union by 71 percent.

The Columbus teachers' strike would begin when their current contract expires on August 21, one day before teachers are expected to return to the classroom, and just two days before the start of the new school year.

Last month, in a meeting which lasted only one minute, the Columbus school district presented the

union bargaining committee with its "final offer." The deal fails to meet their basic needs and the basic needs of their students. Teachers are demanding full funding for school support staff, funding for arts programs, decreased class sizes, and the elimination of the district's proposal to change school beginning and end times and shorten lunch and other breaks.

Even more pressing, according to teachers, are HVAC upgrades to cool down dangerously hot classrooms. The last school year was delayed, in fact, as August temperatures soared to the extent that many classrooms were unsafe.

In a show of defiance against the proposed contract, teachers protested outside the Columbus City Schools' administrative building multiple times last week.

One teacher at the protests, Evan Shelton, told the *Columbus Dispatch*, "We don't want to strike, we want to be in our classrooms with our kids, we want to be getting ready for the school right now, we can't because the board is in the way." Shelton's primary concern is not only for his own livelihood, he said, but for his students "who rely on school lunch," and "on their trips to the school nurse for referrals to Children's Hospital."

Joe Decker, a teacher at Mifflin Middle School, told reporters, "[W]e don't have air conditioning or reliable heating. We've had days that have been canceled because of the weather."

The board doubled down in response to the strike notice, declaring in a statement: "A strike is disruptive and hurts our students most, especially after everything they have experienced over the last few years... And that is why our team is well prepared for an alternate opening should a strike actually take place. Our students' academic progress and social emotional well-being will remain our top priorities." The district has

also gone after the CEA, going so far as to file an unfair labor practice charge with the Ohio Labor Relations Board for supposedly misrepresenting the negotiations.

However, the CEA has no strategy to defeat the attacks by the school district. Indeed, as with the teachers unions nationwide, it has played a key role in keeping school buildings open throughout the pandemic in spite of significant opposition from teachers, parents and students. Meanwhile, it has sought to use the role in reopening schools played by Ohio's Republican governor Mike DeWine to deflect attention from the role of the Democratic Party. But reopening schools and starving them of funds has broad bipartisan support. Democratic mayor of Columbus Andrew Ginther also has demonstrated his willingness to respond ruthlessly to mass opposition, as seen in the brutal police crackdowns against police violence protests in the summer of 2020.

The way forward for teachers is to organize themselves to ensure democratic control over their struggle through the founding of a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the union bureaucracy. Such a committee would also form the basis for building the broadest possible support and unity with teachers all over the country, including in school districts where teachers have formed committees of their own, to fight for adequate resources for public education and an end to unsafe conditions in school buildings.



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