

First teachers' strike since 1975 looms in Columbus, Ohio

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This Sunday 4,000 Columbus City Schools (CCS) educators are set to vote on strike action as they seek to carry out a long overdue counteroffensive against years of attacks on public education in the city's schools.

A "Yes" vote and a strike, however, must be just the starting point in the fight. The WSWs urges all teachers to join and build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and link up with workers across the US and internationally who are fighting against the same conditions of austerity, neglect of infrastructure, soaring cost of living and the homicidal ruling class policy of allowing COVID-19 and monkeypox to spread unimpeded.

Columbus educators face a particularly horrific and unsafe work environment as a result of decades of bipartisan budget cuts. This includes deteriorating buildings, lack of arts and physical education teachers, standing-room-only classes, lack of functional (much less COVID-safe retrofitting) heating, ventilation and cooling systems, and poor pay.

Educators and students across the city (under Democratic Party control since 2000) are forced to cope with roaches, rodents, freezing cold or broiling hot buildings, unsafe wiring and outright filthy conditions. Teachers report via social media truly appalling conditions for educators, much less children.

Angie Renee posted about rodent infestation in her classroom, one corner of which "was covered in mouse feces and urine. ... It was BAD. Everything over in the corner had to be thrown away."

Karen Kelly wrote, "One year I bought 6 new posters for my walls. The heating pipes busted in my [class]room and the moisture caused them all to fall off the walls. When I came in the next morning there were about 16 of those big critters [water bugs] attached to the tape."

Just since March, inspectors have flagged 32 schools for health violations. These include "water intrusion, leaking or missing ceiling tiles, lead-based paint that needs [to be] treated or playground equipment or benches that are in need of repair due to concerns."

The district, which has also presided over the deadly spread of COVID-19 through the schools, has no intention of meeting even the entirely inadequate "demands" of the Columbus Education Association (CEA). Instead, CCS has provocatively pledged to bring in 600 substitute teachers to staff all-remote classes for its 47,000 students.

The district's "last, best and final offer" calls for 3 percent per year wage increases, which amount to a substantial pay cut under conditions of 8.5 percent annual inflation.

The Columbus Education Association's initial demand was an inadequate 8 percent per year, still below inflation. However, on Thursday, union spokesperson Regina Fuentes refused to answer media questions on salary demands. In other words, it is likely that the union has already backed down on pay and other key issues.

By contrast, community members demonstrated their heartfelt support to teachers at the Tuesday, August 16, board meeting. Hundreds of educators, parents and students turned out to protest the district's stonewalling. Eighth grader Inara Pompei spoke to the board, stating, "My impression of the administration is that they are wage thieves, and they should try to pay our teachers in our schools what they deserve," according to MSN.

Parent Andrew Kline also denounced the Board's plans, stating, "Whoever came up with the idea that I'm going to send my first-year kindergarten student to Zoom school with a substitute teacher is completely out

of touch with reality.”

CCS nevertheless terminated negotiations Thursday. The abrupt action followed 21 unsuccessful bargaining sessions. On Friday, the CEA stated that the latest offer was “substantially unchanged from their last final offer on major issues, including no contractual guarantees on HVAC or building conditions.”

School is scheduled to begin Wednesday, August 24, with teachers reporting on Monday for school preparation. The union has said picketing will begin Monday if the strike vote passes.

In a clear indication that the National Education Association (NEA) is working feverishly behind the scenes to reach a sellout deal and prevent a strike, Ohio Education Association President Scott DiMauro and NEA Vice President Princess Moss will also be at Sunday's vote. A particular concern of both the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is to try to contain the explosive anger among educators in advance of the midterm elections, and attempt to head off a direct conflict of teachers with the Biden administration and the Democratic Party.

Throughout the pandemic, the NEA and AFT partnered with Biden to insist that children and young people return to schools in person, in order to ensure their parents were back on the job and producing profits for the corporations. Instead of fighting to protect educators, students and families from the deadly disease, the teacher unions betrayed the work actions of thousands of workers and students who struck and protested to demand COVID protections, including full retrofitting of HVAC systems.

In fact, the NEA devoted its annual convention in July to solidarizing itself with the Biden administration and its corporatist “Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment,” which was created to crush a growing strike movement and subordinate workers to austerity and imperialist war.

The appalling conditions rife within the CCS are an indictment of the union's refusal to fight for even the more minimal safety and hygiene over decades. Therefore, Columbus teachers should be forewarned that this bureaucracy will seek to prevent the full power of educators from being unleashed, just as in last March when the NEA worked in tandem with the AFT to isolate and shut down two of the year's most powerful teacher strikes in Minneapolis and Sacramento. Those

teachers were forced back to work with raises of 2 percent (for each of two years) and 4 percent (one year), respectively.

It is time to draw the balance sheet of the experiences of the past period. Educators must break out of the reactionary, pro-capitalist straitjacket of the NEA and AFT and fight independently of the unions and the two political parties of big business. Not only is it necessary to demand the necessary billions of dollars to provide decent wages and benefits for educators and retrofit, rebuild or construct safe schools, but to mobilize the entire working class in defense of public education, against war and social inequality.

The way forward for teachers is to turn out to the powerful movement developing among teachers and other workers throughout the world and join the growing network of rank-and-file committees comprising the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

On Saturday, August 27, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding an online meeting, “CDC embraces ‘Forever COVID’: The urgent fight for rank-and-file committees to stop the pandemic.” We encourage teachers, education workers, parents and students to attend.



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