

”It is time we said enough is enough”

Teachers take to the picket lines in Columbus, Ohio

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Columbus teachers, why are you on strike? Tell us about the conditions in your school. Share with us the photos of your picket line. Fill out the form at the end of this article or email directly to sherman@wsws.org.

In the first strike in 47 years, nearly 4,700 teachers, librarians, nurses and other school employees took to the picket lines in Columbus, Ohio, early Monday morning. The educators are demanding wage increases, the hiring of more teachers and support personnel, smaller class sizes and retrofitted HVAC to provide clean and safe conditions in buildings.

Teachers are also demanding that all the buildings be brought up to code. Many of the district’s dozens of buildings are rodent- and pest-infested, have leaking roofs, peeling lead paint and other structural problems.

Teachers also want art, music, PE and other programs expanded for the students throughout the district.

Several thousand teachers attended a mass meeting Sunday night at the Columbus Convention Center. Teachers expressed their determination to fight the board and outrage at the board’s final offer.

Teachers came into the meeting with groups of co-workers carrying signs in preparation for picketing the next morning.

They could be heard from outside the meeting erupting in cheers after calls for strike action or denunciations of the board's rejection of their demands to improve education for the children.

Going into the meeting, teachers spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about what was motivating them.

Amber Nash, who has been a teacher for 19 years, stated what was the most important issue for her. “Mold, lead paint. I think it is a basic right that the heating and cooling align with OSHA standards in every building in every neighborhood. The conditions in some of our buildings would not be accepted in the suburbs. So why are they being accepted for some of our most struggling communities?”

Amber currently teaches at West Mound Elementary

School which has undergone a complete rebuilding in the past 8 to 10 years.

“West Mound is actually a new build. It has been completely rebuilt. New air conditioning, new HVAC. We don’t have lead paint. So my building is one of the best buildings.”

Others are not, she said. “I’ve been on the East Side; I was in a Mod [module] that was not attached to the school.”

Amber explained that Mods are like trailers. “We had no plumbing, no running water. I worked eight years there, and I never had less than 28 students every year in a Mod.

“The children in every building deserve an equitable learning space where they feel valued. They can look around them and feel proud of their space. Feel comfortable to learn and be engaged.

“I am here supporting all the children in our city.”

An elementary art teacher, who asked that her name not be used, explained the importance of air conditioning.

“Air conditioning is something you should be able to get in easily. There is no (central) air conditioning. Some of the rooms have window units. It could easily reach 100 degrees. When you walk into the room in the morning, it is already 10 degrees hotter inside than it is outside. I don’t believe that is the most effective way to teach.

“Another concern is the handing out of tax abatements to developers. That is funding for our students that is being taken away. If that is going to happen, it should be transparent to the public. They should be able to see what is going on.”

As a school nurse for 20 years, **Barbara Lafferty** has seen the effects of the poor conditions of the buildings on students’ health.

“To have our buildings in good working order would be a helpful thing for our students. Every August, we would close down several schools because the air conditioning wasn’t working. That is not good for children with asthma and those kinds of things. So it causes health concerns for our children

when those things don't work.

"And they have been promised to make them work, they have been working on them for a while. I don't understand why this can't get accomplished.

"Then in February once again the heat will quit working in some of our schools. That will cause problems for some of our children with health issues. Not to mention, teachers and everybody else working in the building. Would people down here in these skyscrapers put up with that? I doubt it."

Wages and inflation were also angering the teachers. The board's final offer included only 3 percent a year. Yet teachers have lost nearly 16 percent of their wages since the beginning of 2020 due to inflation, and there is no sign of it slowing.

"We are asking for a reasonable pay raise to make up for that," explained the art teacher. "Plus in years past we've completely gone without a pay raise. One time we simply ratified a contract we were already working on; we had no pay raise for that time.

"It is time we make up for that. The board can certainly afford that. They have taken actions as far as the administrators are concerned—so they need to take care of us."

"My husband is also a teacher," explained Amber. "We have been doing a lot of things differently."

Speaking for teachers as a whole, Amber continued, "We are finding that as a group, we are being asked to do more and more and more without financial payback. I went to college for six years. I should earn a good wage where I don't have to work a second job or be concerned about bills."

All the teachers spoke on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"COVID is quite a concern," explained the art teacher, "especially during the pandemic. Being an elementary school, germs spread quite easily and quickly. If COVID is spreading in the community, it is spreading 10 times faster in the school and then it goes home back into the community to parents and grandparents."

"Oh, my god, yes. Are you kidding me?" exclaimed Barbara. "This is the United States. It has been a very difficult two years. All that contact tracing. Yes, it has been difficult."

The contract expired at 12:01 a.m. Monday in the state's largest school district serving 47,000 students. As the early morning broke, teachers "crowded street corners and sidewalks, lined highway overpasses and marched outside of school buildings across the city," according to MSN reports. Picketing officially began at 7:00 a.m., "but many union members showed up earlier than that with folding chairs, snacks, thermoses of coffee and coolers of drinks." The

news outlet noted the determined enthusiasm of educators in their first strike since 1975.

The Columbus City Schools (CCS) district has provocatively prepared to hire 600 substitutes and conduct remote instruction at the scheduled start of school Wednesday. They will be paid an additional \$100 a week to scab on the strike.

Amber summed up why many teachers are supporting a strike:

"I understand the importance of children being in the classroom. This is not how I envisioned the start of the school year for myself, for my children, for my daughter. But it is time we said enough is enough and really stand up for what the children in our city deserve."

While the teachers have shown their willingness and determination to fight for better education for the students of Columbus, the National Education Association (NEA) is working to isolate their strike and force them to return on the board's conditions (see: "No to another school year of mass infection, death and austerity!")

Currently, out of the 3.3 million teachers in the NEA, the Columbus teachers are the only ones in the country to have gone out on strike. The NEA has not even posted a report of the strike on its website or Facebook page.

There are several other ongoing struggles by education workers.

In Philadelphia, 2,000 school support staff, including bus drivers, bus attendants, mechanics, building cleaners, engineers and trade workers, have voted overwhelmingly to strike.

In Washington D.C., 550 American University administrative workers also began striking today for raises commensurate with the city's high cost of living. They and other workers in SEIU Local 500 are currently without contracts.

On Saturday, August 27, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding a public meeting to put forward a program for teachers to wage a unified struggle against another school year of mass infection, death and austerity. Register today and invite your coworkers, family and friends!



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