

Striking Columbus teacher speaks on school conditions

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A striking teacher from Columbus, Ohio, gave the following statement to the World Socialist Web Site at the strike vote. Over 4,000 teachers in Columbus struck Monday after voting down a contract offer from the school district that did not address the appalling conditions in the schools or meet demands for “appropriate class sizes,” as well as full-time art, music and physical education teachers for elementary students.

“I want to remind people that teachers’ working conditions are children’s learning conditions. I can’t underline enough how important education is; it’s the future of our country. At the top no one cares. But the workers give every inch of their heart, their sweat and tears to make schools successful. Pay attention; go into a classroom and see it.

“I’ve been calling for a strike for years. But there’s an artificial separation of workers. Those at the top pit us against each other instead of blaming those responsible—that’s the capitalists.

“I think there has been a general trend of anti-intellectualism and anti-expert, which make our jobs much, much harder. I’m not blaming the parents at all, because the population we serve are trying to keep their families together with 3-4 jobs. These are families with major addictions, incarceration problems, transient home situations. But we have parent support now with the strike.

“In fact, there were 27,000 comments on a thread on Reddit, with the vast majority supporting us. We are gaining traction, over 90 percent of the community supports us. I’m noticing that even right-wing people are suddenly on our side. They are seeing just how bad our schools really are.

“Only recently has the district done anything about dyslexia. I’m a reading specialist, and I taught first and second grade. I was given 40 kids, so many that I had to pick and choose. There were so many children that needed a huge gap-closing. This was not just because of the pandemic; before the pandemic it was exactly the same.

“The response to this crisis by the district was to raise the promotion score for third grade, in other words, failing more kids. We were told to raise their scores somehow because we needed to ‘raise the bar.’ They expect us to get it all together with a caseload of 40 kids, in just 4-5 hours a day. I get kids for 30 minutes maybe and not every day, as recommended. There are not enough reading interventionists. In fact, my job was eliminated this year, and I had to scramble to find a new one.

“This is under conditions in which kids can’t read. Apparently I’m too expensive. Well, I’m making under \$50,000 a year and didn’t even get benefits last year. I have a Bachelor’s plus two classes away from a Master’s and six years of teaching. Additionally, the district has been making the health insurance worse and worse. Teachers are going from \$10 co-pays to now hundreds of dollars for their medications.

“The state of the school buildings here is terrible. In the summer, children are throwing up from the extreme heat, as there is no air conditioning in many buildings. And then they are FREEZING in the winter. The ‘fixes’ were laughable. One school had huge tubes stuck into the windows to heat rooms via propane. I don’t think they care about safety.

“I was previously teaching in a temporary module (‘temporary’ for 30 years). I had a table and a cart in the library that I shared with others; no classroom for a year. Then, because another teacher got so ill from black mold, I was assigned a classroom. The only reason I didn’t get sick was because I wore an N95 mask.

“After the teacher reported the black mold, the district removed what they could see but refused to go into the walls where it was actually located. Not good. Also doors were constantly broken, they wouldn’t give me a key. In the end, they just put paper in the door to make it look like it was closed. But it wouldn’t lock, and that’s a huge safety concern. This was before Uvalde, but the same idea, a door that couldn’t lock.

“These are schools from the 1950s, and the district doesn’t fix them. The principal did everything in his power but was forced to choose between harming a disabled teacher or putting the entire school at risk by leaving a door unlocked.

“So it seemed like an upgrade to get a room, but then the accessibility ramp collapsed. That was the second time. They didn’t replace it either time. This ramp was essential for teachers and students, one of whom used an electric scooter and another couldn’t use the stairs.

“I have not felt so much hope in a while. We can do something here if we stand strong enough and long enough.”



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