

Columbus Education Association shuts down three-day strike after reaching “conceptual agreement”

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Register now to join this Saturday’s online meeting “NO to Another School Year of Mass Infection, Death and Austerity,” sponsored by the US Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

The Columbus Education Association (CEA) shut down the strike of 4,500 city educators, announcing a “conceptual agreement” at 2:38 a.m. Thursday morning. The union said a ratification vote will be held on the weekend and told strikers to immediately begin preparing their classrooms for a Monday school opening. Most teachers returned to buildings on Thursday.

To pull down pickets and end the strike without a democratic decision by educators is a terrible betrayal by the CEA and its parent organization, the National Education Association. The powerful strike galvanized an outpouring of support among thousands of Columbus parents, students and workers looking to reverse decades of decaying public education.

The decision to shut down the pickets was no doubt made at the insistence of the Biden administration, whose federal mediator had demanded the marathon negotiation session which began Wednesday at 1 p.m. With districts across the US all facing similar crises over inadequate pay, unsafe buildings, and looming budget cuts, the Democrats are terrified that Columbus teachers could inspire broader struggles. The mid-term elections are fast approaching amid growing threats of strike action among educators, railroad workers, dockworkers and more, as inflation cannibalizes paychecks, COVID-19 continues to spread and working conditions intensify.

The determination of Columbus teachers and the support for their strike is an indication of growing

working class militancy. The educators’ first walkout since 1975 was embraced by families, students, workers and even many small businesses. Hundreds indicated their support by joining picket lines, recording video messages of support, with social media comments, and donating drinks, food and money.

The CEA abruptly called off the picketing, failing to even solidify a tentative agreement, only a “conceptual” agreement. In other words, no actual agreement in fact exists. On Thursday, Eric Brown, a Columbus City Schools (CCS) board member, said, “we’re wrapping things up in the next few days with that negotiation process.” In other words, the union and the district will now hammer out the real deal at the expense of educators who are demobilized and back at work.

While educators have expressed the need to see a tentative agreement prior to the mass meeting, indications are that no such preview will be provided. In most NEA settlements, teachers are given at best a few “highlights” which aim to cover up a betrayal.

A third-grade teacher told the WSWS, “I’m disappointed that we are going back to work without seeing the contract. I support the union. We went on strike because the board wouldn’t give us commitments, just vague promises that we knew they wouldn’t keep. Without a written contract, I don’t know what it is going to be.”

Teachers were concerned that their demands were met. With inflation currently at 8.5 percent annually, the CEA had previously only called for 8 percent annually—which would likely amount to a small pay cut—but failed to reassure teachers that it hadn’t already conceded to CCS’s insulting 3 percent. A genuine pay

increase in the range of 25 percent or more is essential not only to keep up with galloping inflation, but to address years of stagnating wages.

“For me personally, inflation has had an impact,” said a music teacher to the WSWs. “I’m one who spends a lot of money out of my pocket for the kids and I’ve had to cut some of that down. Inflation has been difficult. But when I get to school, I’ll make that sacrifice personally for some of the kids to try and provide what they need in order for that not to be a variant to their education in their learning process.”

Educators are incensed at the state of Columbus school buildings, some of which date as far back as 1864 or 1898. New construction is essential and all buildings must be fully HVAC retrofitted for COVID protection.

The return to school means the CEA is facilitating the onset of another wave of the COVID pandemic. Already infections, hospitalizations and deaths are up and the reopening of school will bring more disease and death to a hard-hit community.

The terrible degradation of Columbus schools mirrors the collapse of education infrastructure nationally and the steady impoverishment of teachers and education professionals. The bipartisan policy of prioritizing war and de-funding education has proceeded apace for decades. The result in Columbus is schools infested with rodents and roaches as well as black mold. Children are throwing up from the heat in summer and freezing in winter in some buildings.

The music teacher said, “And after years, decades, however you want to say it, of the same thing, we are just really tired of it. We need to speak out and put our foot down and say this is not good for our kids.”

Sara, a parent and creator of “Columbus City Schools Parents and Teachers” Facebook group, told the WSWs, “My primary concern is the conditions of the schools. I agree with 99 percent of what they are fighting for. Being a graduate of Columbus City Schools, I know the conditions of these schools and they are horrendous. Some of these schools should be condemned and demolished immediately.”

However, rushing to get teachers back into buildings and align with the Democrats’ election campaign, the NEA shut down the strike as quickly as possible with the usual claim that they got “the best possible, realistic agreement.” Instead, the NEA, as it did during the

2018-19 teachers’ struggles, is keeping the strike isolated and damping down militancy.

In fact, just as Columbus educators went back to work on Thursday, 1,800 teachers walked out in Kent, Washington. The United Teachers of Los Angeles, the second-largest district in the US, has been working without a contract for two months. Peoria, Illinois teachers likewise begin school without a contract.

There is plenty to provide high-quality public education for all children. Wall Street has amassed unprecedented wealth during the pandemic, minting a new billionaire (not a new school building) “every 26 hours” according to Oxfam. Moreover, the Biden administration has pledged to funnel \$50 billion in funds to Ukraine to fuel the US proxy war with Russia. But for the working class, it is budget cuts and austerity, and the unions have signed on to every concession.

The fact is, to win a genuine victory requires building rank-and-file committees, extending the struggle and conducting a political fight. On Wednesday, Will Lehman, socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers, visited the Columbus picket lines and discussed precisely the necessary perspective to unify teachers, autoworkers and all sections of the working class against austerity, COVID and war.

He explained that teachers, just like autoworkers, had to develop the means to communicate with each other about their struggles and to coordinate actions. Because the union apparatus was opposed to this, he said, it was up to rank-and-file workers to organize and prepare a counteroffensive against raging prices and exploitation. It is a political struggle facing educators that requires breaking from the coattails of the capitalist Democratic Party and unifying all workers.

We urge all Columbus educators to attend the meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on Saturday.



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