

Las Vegas school district declares impasse and demands arbitration as union starts to lose control

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The Clark County School District (CCSD), the fifth largest in the US, with over 300,000 students, has declared an impasse in negotiations and has demanded arbitration to resolve the contract dispute with the Clark County Education Association (CCEA), which bargains on behalf of over 18,000 educators in Las Vegas, Nevada.

This comes after a week in which the two sides met with the Trump-supported governor, Joe Lombardo, both “together and separately.” The minutes of these meetings have not been released, nor will they be, but workers should note that recent interventions by big business politicians in workers struggles resulted in rotten contracts and below inflation raises—including Biden’s intervention to block a strike by railroad workers last year and impose a contract workers did not want.

Contract negotiations resumed in secret again on Monday and Tuesday, after which the CCSD declared an impasse, stating that the proposals of the CCEA were “budget busting,” even though the teachers were only asking for the same level of wage increases that were granted to the administration in August.

This comes after a wave of school closures in the Las Vegas valley impacting mostly elementary schools. The closures have been due to teachers calling in sick en masse as a result of the COVID surge taking place both in Nevada and nationally. There have also been wildcat actions by teachers who have lost confidence in CCEA’s handling of the current struggle.

The last contract proposal by CCSD was rejected at a public meeting of CCEA, which was held under the cover of a media blackout, with reports from union members stating that around 3,000, (or less than 20

percent of the membership,) were in attendance. After the contract was voted down, the leadership submitted and passed a motion to request the intervention of the right-wing former sheriff, Lombardo.

In the intervening period, the Las Vegas chapter of Democratic Socialists of America, in keeping with the tradition of its national organization, has been promoting CCEA rallies as well as an email campaign to get the Trump-backed governor of Nevada involved in the contract dispute.

CCSD was short over 1,200 teachers at the start of the school year, with teachers claiming that the number was double that figure because many of the vacancies were being filled by under-qualified substitutes. Reports on social media have made clear that CCEA has been losing control over teachers, and this can be seen by both the lackluster attendance at public meetings and, more importantly, through the limited wildcat actions taking place on campuses. One teacher told FOX 5 News, “Some of us feel that the only way to get through to Dr. Jara [CCSD Superintendent] and his trustees is if instruction is interrupted.” And others stating in forums that they plan on using up all their sick time before they either lose it, or they leave the profession.

Wildcat action has been taken in direct opposition to the union, which has shown time and again that it has no intention of waging a real struggle. In fact, besides calling for the intervention of Lombardo, the only other measures called for by the CCEA have been pep rallies and calling on teachers to no longer work off the clock, something they should not be doing in the first place. Now that the district has called for an arbitrator (which functions as an arm of management), the CCEA has

declared it “welcomes a third set of eyes” on the negotiations.

Nevada state law bars public employees from striking, and to reinforce this antidemocratic legislation, Clark County District Judge Crystal Eller granted an injunction against the CCEA on Wednesday, finding that they were behind the wave of school closures. She said, “The idea that this can be ignored, that these are sick callouts, and that they are actually due to someone being sick is preposterous.” This is being proclaimed as the COVID numbers climb higher and higher.

The injunction against the CCEA was granted after a previous request was denied by Judge Jessica K. Peterson last week. The CCEA had made clear in their motion to dismiss on August 21, that they had and continue to have no intention of organizing strike action against the district.

In fact, the CCEA has yet to comment on reports that school administrators were sending out threatening letters to teachers who had called in sick, stating that they would be investigated to determine if their sick calls were valid.

The CCEA is asking for an 18 percent pay raise over the life of the two-year contract and they insist that this demand is non-negotiable. However, by welcoming the intervention of an arbiter, the union is ensuring that teachers will never see that 18 percent. This betrayal is being carried out in an attempt to control the militancy of Las Vegas teachers, who are facing disastrous working conditions coupled with low pay, and who have been made to return to work during a COVID spike without a contract.

Teachers should recall that it was the CCEA and Executive Director John Vellardita that helped facilitate the program of Biden and the Democratic Party in forcing children and teachers back to school at the height of the pandemic. At present, hospitalizations in Nevada have been running over 100 a day since the middle of August, an increase of 76 percent over the previous 14 days.

For their part, CCSD, like management everywhere, claims that the money for the raises is just not there. This is despite the release of another tranche of billions to fund the war in Ukraine, while in Nevada, the legislature just passed the largest education budget in the history of the state: Nevada Senate Bill (NSB) 503,

which includes \$12 billion for education in Nevada over the next two years. This is an increase of over \$2 billion over the previous budget and a 29 percent increase in per-pupil spending. On top of this an additional \$250 million was earmarked specifically for raises for teachers and support staff to combat the massive teacher shortage in the state.

The legislature and governor signed the increase into law not out of the goodness of their hearts, but rather because Nevada schools—with the exception of a few public and charter schools in very high-income areas—rank near the bottom in virtually every category.

In the most recent WalletHub rankings, Nevada ranks 39th overall, while ranking 48th in pupil-teacher ratio, 47th in overall spending, and 47th for safety. Despite this, they managed to rank 35th in quality. According to a study done on pre-pandemic metrics released in 2021 by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the US Chamber of Commerce entitled “America’s Best and Worst Metro Areas for School Quality,” listed Las Vegas (which includes CCSD as well as charter schools) as 49th, with only Honolulu behind them.

The only way forward for teachers and for all workers is through the creation of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees that are independent of the two parties of big business as well as the union bureaucracy, which seeks at every turn to subordinate workers to those parties. Workers are not slaves, they have a right to withhold their labor, but the first step in opposing this anti-democratic legislation is through organizing their own organizations of struggle.



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