

Tens of thousands of educators threaten strikes across the US

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Tens of thousands of teachers and school workers in districts from coast-to-coast are demanding strike action over the deepening assault on public education as funds are drained from social programs to pay for war.

Districts everywhere are reeling amid the drying up of \$190 billion in federal COVID-related funding, which expires next year. These cuts, combined with declining enrollment across districts, result in abruptly declining budgets, as state aid to districts is pegged to student numbers.

The growth of social inequality has dramatically impacted K-12 enrollment. On the one hand, greater homelessness, food insecurity and poverty mean more school absences and the phenomenon of “disappearing” students. On the other hand, charter and private schools were able to exploit the crisis in public schools caused by the ruling elite’s refusal to enact the necessary measures to stop the pandemic, and these institutions have continued to increase their numbers among the upper-middle-class.

The broadside against public education will only deepen as the US commits untold billions to the US-NATO war in Ukraine. In the ongoing federal budget crisis, the Republicans are calling for the virtual end of Title I funding, proposing to slash up to 80 percent of the program which aids more than half of all schoolchildren in the US. Title I, established in 1965 under the “War on Poverty,” provides services to 25 million students and assistance to 70 percent of US school districts—an indication of the widespread poverty in the US.

The Democrats have already put forward their own plan to cut federal education funding and will undoubtedly agree to even further cuts in the interests of securing a deal for more money for war.

In districts controlled by both Democrats and Republicans, teachers and school workers are already working under terrible pressures—wages falling further and further behind inflation, staff shortages requiring doubling-up on work of all kinds, poorly ventilated buildings conducive to the spread of COVID, RSV and other diseases, and all the effects of growing poverty.

The mass disenrollment of Medicaid recipients following Biden’s ending of the COVID public health emergency puts as many as 7.3 million children at risk of losing health insurance, threatening both their well-being and school-based health programs.

These attacks are leading directly to an explosion of struggles among educators.

Across California, 10,000 academic workers within the California State University system, including Teaching Assistants, Student

Assistants and Graduate Assistants, are entering into struggle following the expiration of their contract on September 30. Student workers—many of whom make minimum wage and depend upon local food pantries—are demanding an end to poverty wages, paid sick leave, and better working conditions. Ahead of the deadline, students held rallies across multiple campuses, while officials with the United Auto Workers are keeping them in the dark about contract demands and refusing to mobilize a joint struggle by the academic workers with the autoworkers who are currently on strike.

In Las Vegas, Nevada, the fifth largest school district in the US, 18,000 teachers in the Clark County School District (CCSD) are working under an expired contract amid conditions of significant staff shortages, lack of resources, and inadequate pay. Despite teacher strikes being illegal in Nevada and threats from the district, teachers have courageously engaged in numerous wildcat sickouts and protests to fight for better conditions. Earlier this month, the district filed a punitive injunction, upheld by the courts, against the union in an effort to stop the work stoppages.

Students and parents in Las Vegas have demonstrated strong support for teachers, with students holding multiple walkouts during school. Speaking with WSWs reporters, one student said, “Teachers deserve so much more. And I think CCSD and a lot of other school districts are going to be the downfall of our education system.” She added, “I’ve already had eight substitute teachers this year. In fact, my reading teacher just quit and now we have a substitute. So I guess this sub is now a first year teacher.”

In New York City, the largest school district in the US with over 1.1 million students, school bus drivers will be voting in the coming weeks on a sellout contract worked out between the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181 officials, the bus operators and Democratic Mayor Eric Adams, who has announced sweeping budget cuts across all city agencies, including \$2.1 billion from the Department of Education. Bus drivers, who the union kept on the job for months despite a 97 percent strike vote back in June, have launched an independent rank-and-file committee to take control, prevent a sellout of their struggle, and to link their fight with that of New York City teachers, parents and the broader working class.

In Fresno, California, the state’s third largest district with over 72,000 students; 4,000 teachers, nurses, social workers and other professionals are set to vote on October 18 to authorize a strike. They have been working under an expired contract since June. Teachers are demanding significant pay increases, class size caps and a reinstatement of lifetime health benefits, which were ended in 2005. The district has preemptively announced plans to hire subs at \$500 per day as scabs in the event of a strike.

In San Francisco, a district with over 55,000 students; 6,500 teachers, counselors, nurses and other school employees are voting on October 11 to authorize a strike. Primary demands are higher pay, smaller class sizes and more support for special education. The district faces a huge teacher and staff shortage, with an estimated 25 percent of vacant positions unfilled. Custodial workers, cafeteria workers and other school staff, who have not seen a single raise during the entire pandemic since their last contract expired in 2020, are also voting to authorize a strike on October 3.

The two largest school districts in Oregon also face potential teacher strikes. In Portland, with 49,000 students, 4,500 teachers could strike beginning October 23 after a 30-day “cooling off period.” Teachers are demanding COLA raises, reduced class sizes and teacher planning time. Despite sitting atop a \$100 million reserve fund, the district’s “last, best” offer included a mere 4 percent per year raise and no increased planning time. On social media, parents and community members were outraged at the conditions inside schools, including large class sizes, high temperatures and mold infested ceilings. One parent stated, “I fully support the teacher’s right to strike. Everyone at my kid’s school is amazing and they deserve better.”

South of Portland, in the Salem-Keizer district, 2,300 teachers could be on strike in coming months.

In current contract negotiations, the administration has remained intransigent in the face of demands for improved working conditions and increased staff. The district is demanding that teachers and students make sacrifices to overcome a \$50 million budget shortfall. “Every dollar we add to our budget is a dollar we will need to cut over the coming months,” stated Superintendent Andrea Castañeda.

In San Antonio, Texas, with 47,000 students; parents and community members flooded a recent school board meeting to condemn the district’s proposal to close 19 elementary schools, nearly 20 percent of the district’s schools, citing declining enrollment and a \$300 million budget deficit in the near future.

In smaller districts across the US, teachers, school workers and bus drivers are fighting against the same issues. In September alone, there were school bus driver strikes in Louisiana, Connecticut and Ohio. Teachers in North Andover, Massachusetts, many of whom work two or three jobs to survive, began a work-to-rule job action last week—suspending any voluntary duties not included in their contract—following the district’s refusal to meet the union’s modest proposal for a 13.5 percent raise over three years.

The struggles in the US are part of an international movement with educators everywhere confronting the same issues: a soaring cost of living, draconian cuts to education, crumbling school infrastructure, and the ongoing spread of COVID in schools. From Sri Lanka, to Germany and other countries across Europe, to ongoing teacher struggles across Latin America, educators and students are told there is no money for education while billions are funneled to war, bank bailouts and support for the rich.

All the issues that brought hundreds of thousands of American teachers into mass struggle in the strike wave of 2018-2019 remain unresolved and have only increased over the last three and half years.

The living standards of teachers has fallen. A recent report found that the “teacher pay penalty”—the disparity between teacher pay and that of similarly educated professionals—hit a record 26.4 percent in 2022. Average teacher pay, adjusted for inflation, dropped by \$128 per week between 2021 and 2022.

At the same time, the bipartisan assault against public education has only deepened, from the vast expansion of privatization schemes, to

ongoing bipartisan budget cuts, to growing far-right censorship in schools. All of these attacks are creating the conditions for an explosive growth of struggles by teachers, parents and students to defend public education.

In 2018-2019, the strike wave began independently of and in defiance of the trade union apparatus, which was able to temporarily suppress this militant rebellion, channel teachers behind the Democratic Party, and force through sellout contracts that ensured a further decline in teachers’ living standards and working conditions.

But the ability of the union bureaucracies to suppress these struggles is breaking down, as shown by the wildcat sickouts of Las Vegas teachers. Since 2019, educators have gone through enormous experiences, from being forced by the union apparatus to return to COVID-infested classrooms to facing the isolation and sabotage of one strike after another.

Educators have powerful allies throughout the entire working class facing the same untenable conditions. These include healthcare, logistics and auto workers, who are battling not only the corporations and the politicians but also the trade union bureaucracies.

Despite 150,000 rank-and-file autoworkers voting by 98 percent to strike, the UAW bureaucracy under President Shawn Fain continues to order 83 percent of workers to keep working without a contract in the fraudulent “stand up strike.”

The essential task confronting educators now is drawing these lessons and recognizing the need to build a new leadership, independent of the union bureaucracies and the Democratic Party, that will unify the struggles of educators across the US and internationally.

Only the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to build this leadership and to coordinate the fight of educators with that of auto workers, health care workers, and more in a common struggle not only for better working conditions, but for an end to war, exploitation and inequality.



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