

School workers in Durham, North Carolina stage ongoing sickouts as district rescinds raises

Jane Wise
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Last Wednesday, a courageous sickout by staff across Durham, North Carolina, forced the closure of 12 school buildings. Further protests are continuing this week.

In mid-January, 1,300 classified staff in the district were informed that the raises they had been receiving since October were paid in error and would be rescinded. In effect, this means workers will receive a pay cut of hundreds or thousands of dollars per month amid a desperate cost-of-living crisis.

Classified employees are some of the lowest paid in the district and include teaching assistants, interpreters, physical/occupational therapists, secretaries, bus mechanics, cafeteria workers, custodial staff and grounds crews.

During the last two weeks of January, sickouts among bus drivers and cafeteria workers disrupted transportation and school lunches. Last Wednesday, no doubt facing growing opposition among its members, Durham Association of Educators (DAE) officials called a protest and announced a sickout among educators and staff, forcing the closure of 12 schools.

The protest Wednesday drew broad support within the community, with parents joining the picket lines as well. One parent told local news, “When we found out what the day was for and why they didn’t have school, we were actually totally OK with it. ... It’s a short-lived inconvenience. The longer DPS goes underfunded, that’s really the problem.”

The compensation debacle is the result of a salary study that was conducted by DPS to supposedly bring classified salaries up to “market rate” and address the lack of workers. The authors of the study, HIL Consultants, found, among other transgressions, that the district’s classified staff had not received cost-of-living increases sufficient to keep up with inflation in over 10 years. A HIL consultant is quoted in local media as having stated that classified salaries have been “frozen in time.”

Due to an error in implementing the new salary schedule,

classified staff were ostensibly overpaid at a rate higher than the district had budgeted for. Some employees started seeing pay raises in July 2023, while the majority of certified staff saw an increase beginning in October 2023.

On January 12, staff who had been “overpaid” were notified of the error and informed that their raises were being rescinded, with the district initially demanding the workers pay back the raises.

Throughout late January, wildcat actions by school bus mechanics, cafeteria workers and custodians disrupted normal operations and drew attention to the district’s draconian demand.

Faced with mounting opposition, including a rally of hundreds of educators at the January 25 school board meeting, the district back-pedaled and voted unanimously to dip into reserve funds to cover the \$4.5 million overpayments and to avoid staff having to pay back what they had received since October.

This still left the question on how classified staff would be compensated. The school board, no doubt in discussions with the union bureaucracy, has proposed two options that they say are in keeping with their budget now, since they claim they have used nearly half of their reserves to allow staff to keep their money.

The first proposal would keep the new salary schedule, which excludes work experience prior to employment with DPS and includes at least a 4 percent raise.

The second proposal would restore the previous salary schedule, employees would keep their steps, and receive an 11 percent raise. However, some employees would receive less pay than outlined by the new salary schedule.

Under the new salary schedule, workers would receive step raises according to the number of years they have worked for DPS. Any prior professional experience would no longer factor into their raises.

For instance, a mechanic who worked 10 years in DPS and 10 years in a private shop would be on Step 19 of the

previous salary schedule. According to the new schedule, the mechanic's experience prior to working for DPS no longer counts, knocking them back to Step 10 and freezing their pay for nine years when they will reach Step 19 again.

During a seven-hour meeting on Friday, the DPS school board was unable to come to a decision on how certified employees will be paid. The school board has scheduled another meeting on February 8 to continue the discussion.

But workers were not satisfied with either proposal. "There are employees who quit their second jobs. There are employees that made adjustments to their retirement based on these numbers for this calendar year," an employee told ABC 11.

A physical therapist in the district who has been dropped from Step 33 to Step 1 under the current plan said, "It's pitting staff against other staff. ... Some people are gonna benefit from Option A, and some are gonna benefit from Option B."

The union's letter to the school board on Saturday, announcing another protest day on Monday, couched its tepid demand in the form of a "plea for your leadership to align with the needs of educators." DAE President Symone Kiddoo said the district's proposals fall short "after decades of underfunding, a global pandemic that drove many long-term school employees out of the profession, increasingly complex student needs, and years of understaffing."

Kiddoo called for a reversal to the policy affecting salary steps, no pay cuts, and for the board to conduct "regular meetings with union members." Any such discussions—if they have not happened already—will not produce anything for school workers.

The DAE and its parent organizations, the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) and the National Education Association (NEA), support Democratic Governor Roy Cooper and the Biden administration, which are overseeing savage attacks on public education.

Durham Public Schools is the second district in the state this month to demand educators pay back money.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) is requiring 225 English teachers to give back \$1,250 bonuses they received on January 12 that were intended as incentives to retain new teachers. The ongoing teacher shortage across the country has forced districts such as CMS to take the paltry measure of adding retention pay to teachers' salaries, which does little to rectify decades of wage stagnation in education.

Public education in North Carolina, as throughout the United States, has long been under bipartisan attack. Last year, the state implemented a sweeping expansion to its school voucher scheme, more than doubling funding from \$170 million to over \$400 million. A study by the North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management found that

the expansion could cost public schools up to 8 percent of their funding in the next few years.

In Alamance-Burlington, 35 miles west of Durham, the superintendent has recommended over 50 layoffs in the face of a financial crisis.

This takes place as schools across the US are faced with a dire fiscal cliff in the current school year, already taking the form of mass budget cuts, layoffs, and school closures.

While public education continues to be bled dry, including through the Biden administration's discontinuation of the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) money, both parties of Wall Street have come together to fund a record military budget of \$886.3 billion. The US funding and backing of Israeli genocide in Gaza and war throughout the Middle East, as well as the US-NATO proxy war against Russia and Washington's escalating conflict with China, will require evermore brazen attacks against the working class at home.

Under these conditions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers are desperate to contain the growing militancy among educators, campaigning to keep educators subservient to the Democratic Party and isolating teachers struggles across district and state lines.

The fight against the attacks on wages and jobs in education will not come from the trade union bureaucracies, tied by a million strings to American capitalism, nor will it come from appeals to Democratic Party, which is waging brutal war abroad and class war at home. The defense of public education requires building a movement to unite the international working class, independent of the union apparatus and both capitalist political parties, in a common struggle to abolish capitalism and replace it with world socialism, which will put human need above private profit.

Are you an educator? Fill out the form below for information on expanding the network of educators rank-and-file committees.



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