

Denver teachers vote on new contract as opposition mounts to union concessions

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Teachers in Denver, Colorado have been voting this past week on a new contract for 3,000 educators covering the next three school years. Their current labor agreement is set to expire on August 31.

The new contract is based on a tentative agreement reached in June between the school district and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA). Announcing the June agreement, DCTA president Rob Gould stated that “this agreement was made possible because our members showed up every single week and fought tirelessly to win a contract that respects, pays, and values the amazing work they do to support students every single day.”

However, as it soon became clear, the tentative agreement provided no meaningful provisions to meet teachers’ demands. The agreement is, in fact, only the latest in a years-long series of drastic cuts and austerity to public schools; including the notorious late 2024 decision by Denver Public Schools (DPS) to close seven public schools, displacing 1,087 students and dozens of teachers.

Denver teachers should decisively vote “no” on this latest agreement, which only continues the blood-letting. Instead, they should revive and substantially expand the powerful strike they conducted in 2018, which was part of the massive strike wave of educators throughout the US and internationally in 2018 and 2019.

State Democrats and their allies in the union bureaucracies, despite any pro-teacher rhetoric they may employ, are, in fact, seizing upon the vicious austerity agenda of the Trump administration to push through the deepest cuts.

The attacks are not only being conducted through the misnamed “collective bargaining process,” the proceedings of which are entirely hidden from

members until they receive a tentative agreement to vote on which contain none of their demands. It is directed by the Democratic Party-run state government, which continuously chips away at funding for public education and other needed social programs.

To cite only one example: In May, Colorado House Bill HB25-1105, the Public Employee’s Retirement Association True-up of Denver Public Schools Division Employer Contribution reduced the total employer (DPS) contribution rate to the public employees’ retirement association (PERA) from 10.4 percent to 7.4 percent of salary. The reduction is partially offset through a reduction from 1.02 percent of teacher salaries to the DPS division health care trust fund to 0.20 percent. This means the bill simultaneously cuts both teacher pensions and health care.

While the bill was justified by the relatively small unfunded liabilities in the DPS division of PERA, actuarial analysts warn that this state of affairs could quickly change, especially given the reduced contributions in the bill on top of future staff reductions and overall volatile market conditions, triggering the so-called Automatic Adjustment Provision or AAP.

The AAP, if triggered, would increase employee pension contributions by 0.5 percent while reducing the annual cost-of-living increase for retirees, also by 0.5 percent.

Teachers will only be able to resist all of these cuts through the formation of their own rank-and-file committees to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. The DCTA and Colorado Education Association (CEA) bureaucracies—which are intimately tied to the Democratic governor and state legislature—do everything in their power to stifle teachers’ just demands for better pay, benefits and classroom conditions for their students.

The current tentative agreement that teachers are voting on, for its part, includes a 7.88 percent average increase the first year followed by average 4.15 percent increases in both the second and third years. These figures, already woefully inadequate, will be lower in the middle stratum of teachers with most of the increases going to first year teachers and teachers holding a doctorate, the latter of which constituting a small minority. Moreover, only a 2.97 percent average increase will be applied to Steps and Lanes, based on years of service and professional credentials obtained.

Teachers only reach a higher “step” through multiple years of service, while advancing “lanes” involve a massive commitment in teachers’ time and money to achieve advanced degrees and credit hours rendering the proposed increase almost negligible.

There is also an insulting \$1,000 annual cost-of-living raise for the next three years along with a one-time \$1,000 bonus before taxes. In other words, the agreement contains nearly microscopic pay increases along with small \$1,000 lump sum payments, which will not be factored into any future pay increases.

In February, during ongoing contract negotiations between DCTA and the Denver Public Schools (DPS), the government-assigned contract arbiter ruled that teachers would not be entitled to a meager 5.2 percent cost of living increase. This is even though the increase was stipulated in the teachers’ contract should there be proportionate reduction in the state’s “budget stabilization factor,” which serves as a rainy day fund for Colorado public schools.

Not only was there a sufficient reduction but the budget stabilization factor itself was eliminated by state lawmakers. Celebrating the elimination of the program and promising increased funding for starved public schools as a result, Democratic Governor Jared Polis told a cheering crowd, “That means smaller class sizes. It means better pay for teachers. It means better pay for paraprofessionals. It means more opportunities and pathways for kids to succeed and get ahead to help power our state for the future. This is a big deal.”

As the latest agreement in Denver, the state’s largest district, makes clear, however, these were all lies.

Now, under the terms of the new agreement, pay for first year teachers will rise to a mere \$57,666 from \$55,257. This is far less than even the recommended \$70,000 to \$75,000 annual income needed to afford a

one-bedroom apartment in the Denver city area.

The agreement also includes provisions around classroom size that remain completely unenforceable. It only stipulates that the district will “make reasonable efforts to reduce oversized classes.”

The current class size cap remains at 35 and has been at that level since 1994 with many teachers and administrators reporting classrooms at the cap level since. At the elementary school level, more than 38 percent of classrooms had over-sized classrooms of more than 25 students and 9 percent of classrooms had 30 students or more.

Per the current contract, those classrooms are entitled to receive between one and three hours of support each day from a paraprofessional allowing younger students to receive adequate instruction given the large class size. Due in part to extremely low salaries, paraprofessionals are extremely difficult to find. According to Brian Weaver, co-chair of the DCTA bargaining team, “Getting paras mid year is almost impossible. The admin says, ‘Hey, I’m looking for a para and nobody is applying, but you still have a class size that is unmanageable.’”

Teachers have registered immense disapproval of the new contract on social media with hundreds signing a *change.org* petition calling for a no vote.

One teacher who signed the petition stated, “There is nothing even close to what the union told us in the beginning they were aiming for. To send us an email ‘celebrating’ was in extremely poor taste. Any minuscule ‘raise’ is completely negated by the ridiculous cost of healthcare premiums (for basically no coverage on a deductible based system). This is supremely disappointing!”

Another commenter noted, “So, we got nothing again. Our health insurance is horrible. Cola non-existent, what a great contract. Everything that actually matters to 99 percent of us was just glossed over.”



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