

“I work three jobs”: North Carolina teachers protest across state to demand school funding, pay increases and affordable healthcare

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On Wednesday, January 7, hundreds of teachers staged call-outs, demonstrations and walk-ins at dozens of schools across North Carolina. They protested stagnant wages, soaring healthcare costs and the deliberate starvation of public schools. Parents and community members joined boisterous picket lines and brought hand-made signs. In Charlotte, protesters chanted, “fund public schools,” “pass the budget” and “pay your teachers.”

The North Carolina Teachers in Action, which sponsored the protest, reported between 650 and 750 educators participated at 52 schools, spanning counties from the Atlantic Coast to the Piedmont. Major concentrations were reported in Wake County (30 schools), New Hanover County (15 schools), Charlotte-Mecklenburg (five schools), and Gaston County (two schools), with protests held at intersections, school entrances and community gathering points.

The action was organized independently of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) bureaucracies. North Carolina Teachers in Action emerged out of the wildcat sick-out protests in the fall of 2025 against the state budget deadlock and worsening conditions in the schools. The organization said that it would continue actions on the seventh day of coming months.

The immediate trigger is the continued absence of a finalized state budget, meaning no raises for teachers, frozen step increases and the further erosion of already inadequate benefits. Teachers are also facing sharp increases in healthcare premiums, effectively transforming stagnant wages into pay cuts.

The state government, with a Democratic governor and Republican-controlled legislature, has provided huge tax giveaways with the richest 1 percent of North Carolinians receiving \$4.9 billion in annual tax cuts. The top 20 percent receive \$15.8 billion, an amount exceeding the state’s entire K-12 and community college budget combined. The funding crisis will only worsen under the impact of Trump’s massive

cuts on federal spending for public school programs.

Teachers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the conditions that drove them to take action and broader assault on public education.

Veteran teachers explained that the state’s step-pay system systematically penalizes experienced educators. One teacher, with 19 years in the classroom, said her pay has been effectively frozen for a decade. “There is no increase for steps 15 to 25,” she said. “So, I have not made any more money where I am in my career.”

As teachers reach the years when they are most relied upon to mentor younger staff and stabilize schools against high turnover, step increases end entirely, forcing many to take on additional work simply to survive. “I work three jobs,” the teacher said. “I am a teacher full time, but I am also a tutor and a pool manager in the summer, just to make ends meet.”

Another teacher, with 14 years in the district, described the cumulative impact of years without meaningful cost-of-living adjustments. “We’re about 20 percent below cost of living—that’s including all the time people have faced inflation,” she said.

What politicians describe as “raises,” the teacher explained, amount to just 1-1.5 percent annually, far below inflation and nowhere near what would be required to maintain purchasing power.

Asked what would be required for real change, she emphasized the need for collective action across the entire public education workforce. “Every teacher needs to leave every school, every public school, for it to actually make an impact,” one teacher said, stressing that bus drivers, cafeteria workers and instructional assistants face the same pressures. “Anybody in public education is overworked and underpaid—and that’s by design.”

One organizer for NC Teachers in Action said teachers in Wake County are “starting to notice” colleagues turning to food banks and that “many, many teachers” work two or three jobs to survive.

North Carolina ranks 43rd in the nation in average teacher pay, according to the National Education Association, and is at or near the bottom nationally in per-student funding and funding effort. The state earned an “F” grade in the Education Law Center’s 2025 *Making the Grade* report, despite explosive economic growth and record corporate profits. The state is home to major banking and finance, pharmaceutical and biotech firms and global manufacturing facilities owned by Daimler Trucks, Toyota, Siemens and Wolfspeed.

Teachers rejected claims that there is no money for education. “They have the money,” one said. “They’re just not funding it.” The teacher directly linked austerity in schools to military spending and imperialist war. “On the one hand, they give billions to the military,” a teacher said. “They go start wars. The situation in Venezuela, with the kidnapping of that president—it’s completely illegal.”

Students echoed these conclusions. One student said money being drained from education would instead fund war. “Probably funding the actual war,” they said, referring to weapons and military operations.

Asked whether war constituted an attack on education, the student replied, “It’s a domino effect. It goes down to people like us.”

Teachers also described the impact of ICE raids on students and families. One explained that recent raids created fear throughout their school, affecting even US citizens. “Those kids were scared to come back,” the teacher said. “They were scared to be home.”

North Carolina students walked out in November to protest ICE’s Operation Charlotte’s Web and support immigrant families, with over 30,000 in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district carrying out a sickout, and a total of 56,000 young people refusing to attend school.

Calling the normalization of repression unacceptable, the teacher added, “What happened in Venezuela is reflected on the streets of American cities. It used to be considered a violation. It still is—but he [Trump] gets away with it.”

Supporters of the protest noted the failure of the National Education Association-affiliate, the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE), to fight the degradation of wages and benefits. Asked to comment on the protests, one said the NCAE refused to comment. In November, when the group held an initial protest, the union openly discouraged participation, claiming the demands “weren’t clear” and the legislature wasn’t in session. The union proposed another toothless letter-writing campaign.

WSWS reporters distributed a statement issued by the Educators Rank-and-File Committee (ERFC), which explained that the mass action across North Carolina was part of “the rising tide of opposition of the working class

against the attack on the right to public education, growing austerity, the witch-hunting of immigrants, dictatorship and war.”

But it warned that a new strategy was necessary to meet the attacks on education by both Democrats and Republicans and that the struggle could not be left in the hands of a union apparatus tied to Democrats and the profit system. The ERFC urged teachers to “build independent power from below by establishing independent democratically controlled organizations to coordinate action and connect with workers across geography and job categories. This means building rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood to transfer power from the union apparatus to the educators in the school buildings.”

The statement concluded:

The Educators Rank-and-File Committee urges North Carolina educators to fight for the following demands:

- * Inflation-beating pay increases.
- * Full staffing levels (counselors, nurses, special education support).
- * Restored benefits with no premium increases.
- * Safe schools for all students, regardless of immigration status.
- * Billions for public education not corporate tax cuts and war

Today’s call-out can be a one-day headline—or the beginning of a powerful movement that unites teachers, students and workers against austerity, repression and war.

Rank-and-file committees, united under the banner of the International Workers Alliance and Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), provide the means to unify an unbeatable force: the massive working class.

The future of our schools, our communities and democratic rights depends on what you build next.

To join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.



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