

Unions isolate striking Pueblo, Colorado teachers

By Bill Kidd and Will Morrow
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Around 1,000 Pueblo, Colorado schoolteachers began striking yesterday, closing down all 33 schools across the district, in the first teachers strike in the state since 1994. They are demanding pay raises and cost-of-living adjustments for teachers and paraprofessionals, and improved retirement funding.

The strike takes place under conditions of an ongoing wave of teacher strikes across the US and internationally. The two national teachers unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have worked to isolate the teachers and confine the struggles to a state-by-state basis. They have isolated and betrayed strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona since March.

In Pueblo, the unions are isolating striking teachers not only from their counterparts across the US, but even throughout the state, absurdly presenting the crisis facing teachers as one located within the boundaries of school district 60. Pueblo teachers voted overwhelmingly to strike on April 21, by a margin of 471-24. The Colorado Education Association (CEA) nonetheless prevented a common struggle by Pueblo teachers with thousands of educators across the state, including 10 of the largest school districts, who walked out on April 26 and April 27.

The CEA's Facebook posts on the strike employ the hashtag "PuebloUnited," while a post yesterday called on other teachers to "keep Colorado teachers in your hearts and prayers."

Among workers, however, there is overwhelming support for an expansion of the struggle. Ryan, an English and journalism teacher on strike at Central High School, told the WSWS, "We hope this is a first step into a statewide strike. About 95 percent of the people in Pueblo support the strike. We have received

messages of support from the Aurora system, district 11 and district 12. We've also received support from the Steel Mill in town [Pueblo] and from the firefighters."

The crisis facing teachers in Pueblo is the product of a systematic assault on public education at a state and federal level over the last three decades by both Democrats and Republicans. Since 2009, the Colorado state government, under Democratic Governors Bill Ritter and John Hickenlooper, has cut more than \$7 billion from education funding, an average annual shortfall of \$780 million. Health insurance costs for Colorado teachers have increased by 70 percent since 2012.

These cuts have led to a budget crisis in local school districts, which have responded by imposing the shortfall on the backs of teachers and students. The Pueblo school district alone has faced more than \$150 million in cuts over the past nine years.

The district announced this year that it will move to a four-day school week in the 2018-2019 school year. In a letter published last month, superintendent Charlotte Macaluso declared that as the district's student enrollment continues to decline, "the school board will have to make more difficult decisions about funding, including potential reductions in workforce and school closures."

The CEA is not carrying out a struggle against school funding cuts, school closures or teacher layoffs. Instead, it is calling on the Pueblo school district to provide paltry wage rises of 2 percent for teachers, 2.5 percent for paraprofessionals, and a small reduction in health insurance costs. Pueblo teachers are paid approximately \$10,000 per year below the national median.

The last of the union's demands is for the school

board to “respect the educator and community voice in decision making.” These are code words for the central concern of the highly paid executives who control the unions: increasing the privileges and influence of union bureaucrats and giving them a greater “seat at the table” with school boards to collaborate in imposing cuts to school funding and suppressing opposition among school workers.

The attacks on Colorado teachers have been spearheaded by the Obama administration, whose Race to the Top funding pool forced states to compete for funds by demonstrating they would increase teacher “accountability” in public education by dismantling teacher protections and expanding charter schools.

In 2010, the state’s Democratic governor and Democratic-controlled legislature passed Senate Bill 191, which overrode teacher tenure and made job security dependent on student “performance.” Teachers whose annual evaluation, based on student test scores, are rated as “ineffective” for two years in a row can now be stripped of tenure protection.

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