

In their first strike in 25 years, Denver, Colorado teachers walk out

By Nancy Hanover
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Denver teachers are set to walk out today in their first strike since 1994. Negotiations between the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) and the Denver Public Schools (DPS) have dragged on for 15 months during which the union has kept teachers on the job. Teachers voted by 93 percent to strike on January 22.

The Denver strike highlights the growing determination of educators to beat back the concerted bipartisan assault on public education. As Denver teachers take to the picket lines, Oakland, California, teachers have voted by 95 percent to strike as early as next week; West Virginia teachers and school workers have voted “overwhelmingly” to strike or engage in any work action necessary to oppose a pro-privatization education bill; Wright State, Ohio, faculty and Chicago charter school teachers are on strike.

The fight of 5,600 Denver teachers follows the six-day strike of 33,000 Los Angeles teachers and the march of 2,500 Virginia teachers in January, which in both cases, pitted teachers against Democratic-run state governments. This follows strikes by tens of thousands of educators last year in Arizona, West Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Washington state, and in the cities of Jersey City, New Jersey, and Pueblo, Colorado.

This teachers’ rebellion is by no means an American affair. “Red pen” teachers have been marching every weekend across France, Tunisian teachers have been on strike since October, New Zealand primary school teachers are threatening to resume their walkouts and similar struggles have erupted on virtually every continent over the course of the last year.

While the world’s billionaires increase their wealth by \$2.5 billion a day, teachers find themselves in the front lines of the fight against the degradation of essential social rights by capitalist governments around the world, which claim there is no money for public schools or to pay teachers decent wages.

As is universally the case, the primary concern of Denver educators is low pay. The city is notoriously expensive, but the state—long a stronghold of Democratic Party politics—is

presently 39th in per-pupil spending with teachers’ pay ranked 50th in the country compared to other college-educated workers, with median salary at \$52,480.

Adding insult to injury, teachers’ entirely inadequate wages are accompanied by ProComp, a form of merit pay and other “incentive” differentials, viewed by teachers as divisive, unfair and unreliable. Teachers are seeking to overturn ProComp, which in an additional indignity was co-designed by their own union itself. In the final hours of negotiation on Saturday, the district further angered teachers by doubling-down on such bonuses, many of which are tied to standardized test scores, and ignoring the issue of base pay.

The district has consistently taken a hard line over the last 15 months and repeatedly sought government intervention to block a strike. In the lead-up to the walkout, DPS Superintendent Susana Cordova provocatively advertised for federal workers furloughed by Trump’s government shutdown to sign up as strikebreakers. She also threatened to report striking immigrant teachers for deportation and vowed to keep the schools open with substitutes at double pay.

Throughout the fruitless bargaining, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association has delayed strike action. This is in line with the chief strategy of both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association, the latter with which the DCTA is affiliated. Unable to any longer prevent teacher strikes, both national organizations have worked ceaselessly to isolate walkouts by state or city teachers and betray them, one by one.

Militancy continues to grow with educators receiving growing support. On January 28, over 1,000 students across Denver organized sit-in demonstrations to support their teachers at Northfield High School, Martin Luther King Jr. Early College, East High School, George Washington High School, Denver School of the Arts and John F. Kennedy High School.

“We wanted to show our teachers that we know they are critical to our learning environment,” Adriana Medina, an

organizer of the sit-ins, told the *World Socialist* “We know that we won’t get the same level of education from substitutes.

“What happens is that teachers often leave in the middle of the year. It is very sad because we build relationships with our teachers. This is a poor area, and the school system does not get enough funding. The teachers don’t leave because they don’t believe in us but because they can’t afford to live,” she said, adding that students will continue these demonstrations.

Denver educators have been told there are no resources to address their demands even though the state is home to 10 billionaires, including the Cargill family, Charlie Ergen (Dish Network) and Pat Stryker, whose private fortunes have long been protected by the Democratic Party. In fact, Colorado was named the “best state in the US for rich people” in a 2018 survey, which noted “lowest-in-the-nation property tax assessment ratios for residential property” and low income tax rates.

Sean Bowers, a Denver high school physical education teacher, speaking to CNN, said that with a base salary of \$42,000 he has to drive for Lyft, coach sports, run a ninth-grade academy and write curriculum for extra money. Nonetheless, he lives with three other roommates and had to take out a loan just for the security deposit on his rent. “I don’t have that extra \$800 to \$1,200 to throw down. We’re not asking for a million dollars,” he emphasized, “We’re asking for an extra \$200 to \$300 per paycheck so that I can save up, buy a house and live in my community and not jump from house to house.”

Another teacher, posting on the Facebook group “Fair Pay for Denver Teachers,” wrote, “Just woke up because I was doing my second job driving Lyft until 4 am to make enough money for cat food and other expenses I had to buy yesterday. I know teachers can’t make an equal salary with some people in the corporate and private sector but at least we could own houses and cars less than 10 years old and be able to get married and raise kids without having to work extra jobs and see our families more than 30 min a night during the week. That’s all I ever wanted and expected from this profession. Not to be rich, but live a fulfilling, whole life with an emotionally rewarding career.”

The struggle in Denver speaks directly to the common experiences of educators across the US and the world. But teachers must be forewarned about the treacherous and destructive role of the unions, which have done everything to block teachers and other workers from uniting and challenging the Democratic Party, which the unions are aligned with. Top union leaders like AFT President Randi Weingarten (annual salary \$514,000) and NEA President Lily Eskelsen García (\$414,824) are part of the richest one

percent ~~with~~ the US and ~~with~~ hostile to any challenge to the concentration of wealth.

The number of workers involved in strike activity in 2018 hit a 32-year high in the US in a clear indication that workers are chomping at the bit to fight the terrible growth of social inequality. The largest struggles were by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, initiated by the rank-and-file, not the unions.

A new road of struggle must be opened up. The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* urges Denver educators to begin forming rank-and-file strike committees in every school and community, which are independent of both the unions and the corporate-controlled political parties. These committees should rally the widest support among workers and young people, including the students who are looking for a means to support their teachers, and fight for the broadening of the strike throughout the state and nationally.

The rank-and-file committees should meet and formulate their own demands, including an increase in wages of 40 percent, an end to ProComp and the reconversion of all charter schools back into public schools. Rank-and-file teachers must demand that all negotiations be live-streamed and that teachers have a full-week to study and discuss any agreement before voting on the ratification of any contract. Before any such vote teachers must insist on the principle of “No contract, No work.”

Above all, the fight to defend public education will require the building of a powerful political movement of the working class to carry out a frontal assault on the private fortunes of the corporate and financial oligarchy that runs America.

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