

Vote “No” on sell-out contract!

As voting takes place, Denver teachers angry over tentative agreement

By Nancy Hanover and George Marlowe
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It has been more than a week since the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) shut down the strike of more than 5,300 Denver Public Schools (DPS) teachers and educators, the first in 25 years. Teachers are now voting online on a tentative agreement through Sunday.

The *WSWS Teachers Newsletter* urges teachers to reject this deal. As with every teachers’ strike over the last year, the DCTA rushed to shut down the strike without resolving any of the issues concerning poverty wages for teachers or the broader attack on public education.

The unions are working deliberately and systematically to prevent the linking up of teachers in different sections of the country in a common struggle. West Virginia and Oakland, California teachers were literally preparing their picket signs when the Denver strike was shut down.

The limitation and isolation of strikes is no accident, but a deliberate policy enforced by the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) designed to prevent a national strike in defense of public education and in opposition to the privatization policies pursued by both Democrats and Republicans.

As Denver educators vote on the tentative contract, 3,000 teachers in Oakland are striking on the very same issues—inadequate salaries, the failure to fund classrooms and provide essential services, and fundamental attacks on public education through charter schools.

The fact that the DCTA abruptly ended the teachers strike last Thursday without a ratification vote on a new contract angered many teachers. Despite the legal requirement to livestream all talks, the final tentative agreement was worked out in secret between the DCTA and DPS.

The union and the media have hailed the settlement as a huge victory. But the deal only provides a meager pay increase for new teachers even as veteran teachers with more than 20 years will have to endure a pay freeze. Starting base salaries will rise to \$45,800 from \$42,789. Teachers in

Colorado have seen a more than 17.4 percent decline in their salaries (inflation-adjusted) in the last decade and a half.

The average pay increase of 11 percent keeps teachers in Denver and Colorado far below what they made 15 years ago (the district had already offered 10 percent before the strike). As in other major cities, the cost of living and housing in Denver takes up more than a third of family incomes.

Many younger teachers also have massive student loan debts. Molly, a teacher in Denver told the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*, “I have astronomical debt. I am part of Public Service Loan Forgiveness, and I’m just crossing my fingers that my debt does get forgiven. Otherwise I will never be able to pay it off. My husband and I are both college graduates, and I have a master’s degree. We are working professionals and struggle to pay our bills, let alone use our money to enjoy our lives.”

Annie, a Denver teacher also spoke of the high cost of living. “We still aren’t caught up even with our new salary schedule. The cost of living here is astronomical compared to wages for most people.”

Numerous teachers and educators are also angry that the agreement bargains away the pay of Specialized Service Provides (SSPs) — nurses, psychologists, speech pathologists, and other support staff—who will see a fall in pay because of the way their professional credentials will be compensated.

Molly spoke out on the lowering of pay for support staff. “I don’t agree that it is acceptable to sacrifice SSP lanes to get this contract,” she said. “Teacher pay and retention is a crisis that our district doesn’t seem serious about solving. SSP retention is lower than teacher retention. This deal shows how little all professionals are valued in this district. I personally am getting an 11 percent raise, but it isn’t just about me.”

Despite vocal opposition from teachers, the agreement maintains the hated ProComp merit-pay system. While

teachers now have a more streamlined “steps” and “lanes” system, the revised ProComp still ties teacher increases to incentives for additional training hours they complete. A single unit of such training requires at least 45 hours, which adds to the massive workload teachers already face.

Moreover, the additional \$23 million that the DCTA allegedly won to fund the limited salary hikes is contingent upon the implementation of “ProComp 3.0,” the last page of the agreement states. In other words, the money to finance the new agreement is based on the union working with the DPS to update and extend merit pay. Nowhere in the TA does it spell out of what ProComp 3.0 consists.

Most fundamentally, the new agreement, far from rolling back the drive for school privatization, demonstrates, once again, that the union is a willing accessory. Denver was seen as a national model for school “reform” during the 2000s. With the full backing of the Broad Foundation and the Democratic Party, sweeping new policies for “merit pay” and charterization were implemented with the collaboration of the DCTA.

The reactionary basis of this “school reform” was the insulting lie that students struggle in school not as a result of defunding education, lack of supplies and enrichments, large class sizes or poverty, but because teachers were not financially incentivized. DCTA helped to design the initial program in 1999 and then assisted in its modification in 2008 under then-superintendent Michael Bennet, now a Democratic US senator.

Bennet’s system—in line with the Obama administration’s promotion of standardized testing and charter schools through “Race to the Top”—included measuring school and teacher performance by student test scores and opening charter schools.

The defunding of public schools and lavish foundation funding for charters has resulted in a drastic but predictable reduction of public schools. As of 2017, Denver had 104 traditional district-run schools and 117 charter and “innovation” schools, with approximately 20 percent of children attending charter schools in the “portfolio” model.

Compounding this defunding of public schools, the 2018-19 Colorado budget allocated \$5.5 million, or roughly \$300 per student, as an additional subsidy for charter schools to supposedly “make up for” local mill levy money. Colorado’s current Democratic governor Jared Polis proposes to almost double that in his 2019-20 budget. Polis himself is a founder of a charter school chain, New America.

Finally, the union agreed to the return to work without pay for the three-day strike, adding insult to injury. The district withheld up to \$1,200 in missed pay for some teachers.

On Thursday, the DCTA posted a notice saying that there were “some funds” available to “help avoid some of the

worst consequences of lost wages due to the strike.”

“To be clear,” they emphasized, “our strike fund will not be able to make up for all wages lost. Instead we will be able to make small donations (no donation will be over \$500 and most will be significantly smaller) to help reduce some of the worst consequences of lost pay.” Teachers who wanted help were then instructed to fill out a detailed application and upload their recent pay stub to be considered.

In addition to bargaining away back pay, the unions are no longer providing even modest strike pay to their already drastically unpaid members. Meanwhile, the NEA, to which the DCTA is affiliated and pays monthly, spent over \$20 million dollars last year in lobbying and various political action committees. Yet the union claims there is no money for striking teachers.

Denver teachers should reject this betrayal, join the picket lines with their brothers and sisters in Oakland and construct new rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. The defense of public education is not a local or state issue. It is high time to call a national strike linking up educators, students and the entire working class.

The authors also recommend:

Anger grows among Denver teachers, as union gloats about closed-door negotiations
[18 February 2019]

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