

Tensions rise as unions and district attempt to head off strike by Las Vegas teachers

By Dan Conway
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On Thursday, thousands of teachers flooded a meeting of the Clark County School District (CCSD) demanding the district honor contractual provisions mandating raises after the successful completion of professional development activities.

Around 2,600 of the district's 18,000 teachers expected raises after completing enough professional development activities to move across a column on the district's base salary table. In comments made to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, many teachers noted that the raises were necessary, as current salaries were insufficient to provide for themselves and their families.

The CCSD covers the city of Las Vegas, Nevada and surrounding communities and, with 350,000 students, is the fifth largest school district in the US.

Despite the fact that school board president Lola Brooks condescendingly admonished teachers at the beginning of the meeting, telling them "your anger is displaced, but it is our job to absorb it," the school board in fact showed no intention of "absorbing" the teachers' criticism. After 30 minutes of comments by teachers and concerned parents decrying the district for not paying the promised increases, the meeting was abruptly shut down, with police escorting board members outside of the building.

The board later cited "safety concerns," despite the fact that none of the teachers or parent supporters had made any threats during the course of the meeting. Superintendent Jesus Jara nonetheless claimed that the meeting recess was necessary "for the safety of our trustees and everyone else in attendance."

After the meeting was shut down, teachers repeatedly chanted "strike" and vowed that they "would be back."

Nearly 70 percent of the district's more than 18,000 teachers belong to the Clark County Education Association (CCEA) teacher union. The CCEA is currently in negotiations with the district but has promised a strike on September 10 if an agreement isn't reached by that time. Last May, 5,000 of the union's 11,000 members voted 78 percent in favor a strike.

Teachers are determined to make a stand against public education austerity. This is particularly the case in the Clark County district, which has among the lowest levels of per pupil funding in the country, amidst the obscene levels of wealth generated by the casino and entertainment industries. Strikes of

public sector workers, including teachers, are illegal in the state of Nevada, carrying fines of \$50,000 per day for the striking union and threatening loss of employment for any workers involved.

The district, for its part, has promised to keep schools open in the event of a strike, and is waiving fingerprinting fees for any prospective strikebreaking substitute teachers. Superintendent Jara said, "No child will be turned away from our district. All doors will remain open, regardless of any decision by the union."

Aside from the question of professional development raises, the union is also currently negotiating with the district over the latter's use of a "step freeze," which prevented teachers from moving up the salary table during the last school year. Also under discussion are increases in employee contributions to the Public Employee Retirement System, which had reduced teacher paychecks by 0.625 percent last year.

As far as wages and salary increases are concerned, the two sides appear to be in agreement on a 3 percent salary increase, only slightly more than the 2.7 percent rise in the consumer price index as measured by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the Western US. Step increases would also be increased by a modest 2 percent. A roughly 4 percent increase in the district's contribution to health care has also been agreed to by the parties.

In a likely signal that the union is preparing to abandon the teachers' demands for the professional development raises that triggered Thursday's protest, CCEA Executive Director John Vellardita said that the agreements reached thus far represented "significant progress" in avoiding a strike. Vellardita was echoing the sentiments of Jara, who noted that the proposals were put forward precisely to allow the union the chance to claim victory and thus call off the work stoppage. "We agree that teachers deserve more pay," Jara said, "which is why we are offering a 3 percent raise, a step increase and contributing 4 percent toward medical for all their tremendous work."

After a Friday meeting with the district, union officials announced that a "pause" had been reached in preparations for the September 10 strike, with no indication as to when, and under what conditions, a resumption of strike preparations could take place. This is in spite of the fact that Friday,

Vellardita also called the district's offer of a small, one-time payment for qualifying teachers in the salary advancement program insulting, disrespectful and "dead on arrival."

While the CCEA continues its bargaining with the district, the Education Support Employees Association (ESEA), covering thousands of school support employees, is similarly negotiating with the CCSD over the terms of a new contract. There are three upcoming bargaining dates between the ESEA and the district, on August 27, September 3 and September 10. ESEA President Virginia Mills explicitly ruled out the possibility of a strike either alone or in conjunction with Clark County teachers, however. In an August 20 statement released on the ESEA's website, Mills said "We expect to settle a contract with the District via the bargaining table, and not in the streets."

The statement continued, "ESEA does not support or encourage any of its members to engage in an illegal strike. We would remind our members that striking in Nevada may result in immediate termination from the District." Fully endorsing the right-wing nostrum that teacher strikes primarily harm students, Mills stated, "We will not put our kids in harm's way and walk away from our classrooms, our lunchrooms, and our buses."

The other school unions, the Clark County Association of School Administrators and the Professional-Technical Employees Association, told the *Nevada Independent* earlier this month that they too did not condone a strike "in any way shape or form."

The ESEA is the largest local affiliate of the Nevada State Education Association, part of the National Education Association (NEA). The NEA, like its counterpart the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), is actively working to prevent the spread of new teachers' strikes, a situation which the organization and its well-heeled executives believe has gotten too out of hand.

The CCEA, which recently broke from the Nevada State Education Association, has not indicated whether or not teachers will be paid in the event of a strike. Teachers interviewed by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, however, are fearful they will receive no strike benefits. The *World Socialist Web Site* requested clarification on this point from the CCEA last weekend and has yet to receive a response.

In spite of the fact that the district is not paying contractually mandated teacher raises, it nonetheless announced that it faces a \$17 million deficit this academic year, followed by a \$17 million deficit again next year. To close the deficit this year, the district middle and high schools have already cut \$98 per student from their budgets. This was after the May authorization vote in which the CCEA vowed to call a strike if any cuts were made.

Executive Director Vellardita promised that, "Educators are not going to start next school year with one single cut in these classrooms." The 2019-2020 school year began in August,

however, with the union not doing anything to make good on its threat even with a strike authorization vote. Vellardita said there was no longer a need to strike over that issue, as the district "indicated it had enough money to get by" after the cuts.

This overall budget deficit, in fact, was not an accident, but is part of a planned underfunding of public education, in which the district, the state government and the unions have all played their part.

Plans have been underway in the state capital of Carson City for some time to replace the 52-year-old Nevada Plan for Education, which bases education funding on prior year spending regardless of actual student population growth. While the state of Nevada has a very low population density, in recent decades it has experienced explosive growth in the cities of Reno and Las Vegas, leading to vast underfunding of the overall student population. This has also resulted in poor salaries and benefits for teachers and support staff within the Clark County School District, which in turn has left many teachers leaving or refusing to enter the profession. The Clark County School District reported 750 vacancies at the start of the 2019-2020 academic year, a higher number than in any of the four preceding years.

Last May, state Democrats introduced the Pupil-Centered Funding Plan, which would establish a base funding amount per pupil, replacing the year-over-year funding model.

Not surprisingly, this measure was designed to function as a Trojan Horse. In exchange for a modest increase in per-pupil funding that will do nothing to meet students' basic needs, the bill will have the effect of drastically reducing funding for teacher compensation and benefits. Under the provisions of the bill, even if the state's education funding runs a surplus in a particular year, none of the surplus can be used to cover collective bargaining agreements with labor unions. In so doing, the state government has made clear that teachers' contractually guaranteed benefits are no better than the paper they're written on.

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