

# Buffalo, New York teacher discusses issues in contract struggle

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*The following is an interview with a public school teacher from Buffalo, New York. On September 7, following an overwhelming strike vote at a mass meeting on Labor Day, September 4, 3,800 teachers walked out in defiance of the state's anti-strike laws to oppose the school authorities' regressive demands and inadequate pay offer. The strike provoked widespread criticism from the Democratic administration of Mayor Anthony Masiello, school officials and the news media.*

*On Monday, the teachers returned to the classrooms following a closed-door meeting between the school district, the Buffalo Teachers Federation (BTF) and mediators from the State Public Employment Relations Board. A news blackout—agreed to by the union—has been imposed on negotiations. Also on Monday, the district went to court to enforce an injunction against the union issued by state Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dillon. Under the Taylor Law, the state law that prohibits teachers from striking, teachers can be fined two days pay for every day on strike.*

As a substitute teacher for many years in the Buffalo School District I have witnessed the deplorable condition of most of our school complexes, most built as public works projects during the Depression and also the disintegration of the learning readiness of the students. Now a full time teacher, I've had the privilege of working with skilled and dedicated professionals. The anger expressed by every speaker at the Labor Day meeting toward the Buffalo Board of Education was the culmination of a decades-long battle to obtain a single dollar of the previous contract awarded in 1990-94 and the lack of a contract for over a year now.

Another source of the members' frustration, however, has been the weak tactics of union president Philip Rumore over the last 10 years. He has relied almost exclusively on the courts to obtain a settlement. Now

the same court system may fine us and jail him for this strike.

Rumore has now been forced to put on a more militant face. A profile in the September 10 *Buffalo News* calls him a “tough enigmatic leader ...hated by parents and loved by teachers.” But Rumore is a liberal who co-founded the local “Working Families Party,” a reformist group of former 1960s protesters and some AFL-CIO officials, which wants to get out the vote for Democrats like Hillary Clinton. The BTF has endorsed Al Gore and Hillary Clinton for US Senate and other local politicians who portray themselves as pro-teacher, but in reality have joined in the attack on public education.

At the same time the union leadership has done almost nothing to counter the press slanders characterizing teachers as over paid, under-worked, and totally self-interested. While speaking to a coworker on the picket line, I stated that rather than picket an empty building, I would rather knock on 50 neighborhood doors and discuss the non-salary issues concerning teachers, i.e., the lack of counselors, aides, texts, supplies. We should also be countering the claim that the monies teachers receive will lead to the impoverishment of city residents.

The western New York region has had no job growth during this boom stock market era. Tens of thousands of steel, auto, retail jobs have been abolished. Multi-millionaires and billionaires have received huge tax break and grants to build or remain in the region. Ralph Wilson, Buffalo Bill's owner received state and county monies worth \$100 million dollars for stadium renovations and other concessions. Delphi Harrison, with revenues of \$4 billion, received \$18 million. The GM Tonawanda Powertrain plant will invest in a new engine line here, but will receive tax breaks that deprive

that school district of over \$2 million. Just to preserve existing jobs, social services are being bankrupted to bribe these corporate extortionists.

A self-fulfilling prophecy of failing schools is created, ushering in this charter school frenzy, while the social and economic decay manifesting itself in behavior problems with disadvantaged students is ignored. The union officials have minimized the attack that charter schools and vouchers represent to public education and to the current work conditions of teachers. There are now two charter schools, with applications for another half dozen or more.

Today's newspaper also compares the effect of the 1976 teachers' strike on parents and the current strike. In summary, they say, in 1976 there were stay-at home mothers, today they are single working mothers, hence, "striking is a tactic past its time." But who is responsible for pushing millions of women with young children into low-paying jobs with no benefits and inadequate daycare alternatives? It is the Democrats and Republicans who step over each other to take credit for reducing the welfare rolls, which has in fact left many families worse off than when they were on public assistance.

Striking is a tactic, not the end of the fight. Working people can and must be united into a broader political fight against the very forces Rumore has endorsed, and the economic system and inequality that they defend.



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