

Thousands of New York City teachers rally to demand contract

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21 November 2000

Demanding a new contract, 10,000 New York City public school teachers rallied after school at City Hall on November 16. While the president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), Randi Weingarten, is making a salary increase the key issue, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's call for longer working hours for teachers indicates that the negotiations will center on a settlement for increased productivity.

Teachers at the rally enthusiastically backed the call for higher pay, but indicated they were also concerned about the deterioration of public education. The teachers union has argued that higher wages are necessary to keep teachers from being drawn to jobs that pay as much as \$30,000 higher in surrounding New York suburban school districts, while increasing student population and teacher retirements are creating a teacher shortage.

The mayor has tried to turn public opinion against the teachers by claiming they have short work days and spend too little time in the classroom. In reality teachers use the time outside of the classroom to carry out a wide range of functions, from preparing their lessons to addressing the needs of students who are increasingly burdened by social problems.

Estimates before the school year began were that 54,000 teachers would retire. Meanwhile, with school repair and construction projects not scheduled to be completed until 2003, there is expected to be an excess student population, relative to classroom space, of 20,000 to 30,000. At the beginning of each school year, the New York newspapers carry stories about parents lining up to get children registered at neighborhood elementary schools, with some schools having to hold classes in libraries, closets and even bathrooms.

Mayor Giuliani has argued that the public schools do not work. He has promoted the idea of school vouchers and made proposals for more charter schools to be managed by private companies. The New York State

Board of Regents has increased high-stakes testing for students to graduate as their solution to push for school improvement. Students are expected to pass Regents Examinations in all core academic subjects and are tested in mathematics and reading skills at the fourth and eighth grades. Recent test results showed only 59 percent of New York City high school students passing the Math Regents while the scores for the English Regents were somewhat higher, with 76 percent passing.

A crisis of overcrowding in summer school was avoided when some of the 300,000 students originally told they would have to make up classes were told attendance was voluntary. In the event, only 78 percent of the mandated elementary school students showed up. The dropout rate in some city high schools is over 30 percent.

The mayor has proposed raises be only in the form of merit pay for those teachers whose classes have shown that they are meeting raised standards, as demonstrated on standardized tests. While the teachers union's official policy is to oppose merit pay, UFT President Weingarten has offered a proposal she claims is not merit pay but which would pay bonuses to those teachers who are in schools exhibiting higher test scores.

The UFT has combined with city educational advocate groups in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) in a court case accusing New York State of under-funding the New York City system. New York City Schools Chancellor Howard Levy has lent his support to this effort. The fact that the entire state of New York faces a loss of nearly half its teachers in the next decade demonstrates the inadequacy of the resources being made available for public education.

Some teachers at the rally noted to this reporter that money for education and their salaries is not being made available despite the stock market boom that has enriched the upper layers of society, in New York City and across the county.

One first-year New York City teacher at the rally commented, “We give a lot to students. We should earn what we deserve and merit pay is not sufficient.”

Dave, who teaches social studies at Hillcrest High School in Queens, was angry at the attitude and policies of city administrators. “The chancellor's policy is that anyone can be a teacher. But from his special program to bring in more teachers, 50 from the 300 already quit.” Regarding school funding he commented, “There is unlimited money, but Giuliani is a union-buster. He wants vouchers, but that would really only be a help for those already sending their children to private schools. We had a spurt of education funding in the 1960s but that never kept up with inflation. New York City always used the excuse that there was not enough money. Now there is money.”

The size of classes and school populations was repeatedly brought up by teachers interviewed at the rally. A teacher from Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn said, “There are 3,800 students in a school built for 2,500. They are building more jails than schools.” A long-time teacher pointed out that “in Graphics Arts High School, in Manhattan, we are up from 1,300 to 2,000 students.”

An elementary school teacher from Elmhurst in Queens concurred: “I want a lot more money and smaller classes. All the teachers are in small cubicles in an old, converted school lunchroom. We have 2,000 children in a school built for 1,200. So we are on a staggered schedule in the school, instead of all being together. There are no buildings being built. They are taking a junior high school's play yard in order to build an extension for a needed pre-school. And the two seven-year-old computers in the school are not even hooked up.”

A teacher in the city's special education District 75 reproached the Board of Education for there being 18 students in her class. “This is more kids than the 15 legally allowed. We are trying but the district is draining resources to other programs, which also need teachers, but it takes from us. Leaving five kids with one paraprofessional is not enough staff for these children who have severe problems. How dare Giuliani say we are not doing enough work without working an extra period?”

“My daughter is also teaching special education, in Queens, and there are absolutely no substitute teachers, so she is teaching every period. If a teacher is out sick there are only two paraprofessionals to handle the students. You cannot even go to the bathroom because those children cannot be left alone.”

A second-year high school computer teacher

complained, “We are not talking about how we are supposed to teach. There are three computer labs in my school. The computers are eight years old. This is the crap I had when I went to college. The attitude of the administrators in school is ‘Don't cause trouble.’”

Having moved from Jacksonville, Florida, a teacher in his third year in New York made a comparison of the two school systems. “In Florida, there were some problems in the early sixties. The way they solved it was with double sessions. It ended up with the discrediting of the schools so that colleges would not accept our students. We were going to school in churches because there was not enough room in classrooms.”

Along with UFT officials, invited speakers at the rally included Democratic City Comptroller Allen Hevesi, who is expected to run for mayor. The unions have promoted the idea that a Democratic mayor would be sympathetic to the teachers. At the same time they have covered up the fact that recent strikes in Philadelphia and Buffalo, New York were viciously attacked by Democratic city administrations, which worked hand in hand with Republicans to impose anti-strike legislation, fines and threatened state takeovers.

There are now 200,000 city workers alongside the 100,000 teachers and educational staff without contracts in New York. But none of the union officials in attendance at the rally, including those from the city workers unions, did anything to mobilize large delegations of rank-and-file workers from their own unions to join the teachers' demonstration.

See Also:

Philadelphia teachers union calls off strike
[31 October 2000]

Democrats, Republicans unite against strike by Buffalo, New York teachers
[16 September 2000]



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