

New York City workers' protest demands new contracts, wage hikes

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More than 10,000 municipal workers rallied at New York's City Hall on June 8 to press their demands for new contracts and sizable wage increases. The protest was in its large majority made up of city teachers and firefighters, who have been without union contracts for one and two years, respectively. Workers' pay and living standards have fallen behind the rising cost of living, especially housing and medical costs.

Union officials also joined forces with the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association (PBA), representing New York police officers, who are angry over the reluctance of city officials to meet their demands for higher pay for the job of enforcing the status quo, especially in the poorest working class sections of the city.

Many of the firefighters at the June 8 rally wore bright yellow t-shirts that were imprinted with "Firefighters for Fair Play." One homemade sign read, "Become a fireman. Low wages, lung disease, death (Great job)."

A firefighter from the Inwood section of Manhattan with 23 years' experience told the WSW, "We took zeroes in our contracts and now we are entitled to a raise. We have been without a raise for two years. Mostly it's a money issue. Conditions can always be better, but I'm marching for a living wage."

Another firefighter, from a Bronx engine company, explained, "We want to be able to afford to live, not paycheck to paycheck. Bloomberg is running the city like a business. At work, we have lower morale."

An education worker who has been teaching for seven years explained the conditions at the Rikers Island juvenile prison alternative school, named the Horizon Academy. "We need a better salary. You can hardly live on our basic pay. If you want to be dedicated to the kids, it is hard when you have to work

overtime, or a part-time job, and taking care of a family.

"I have classes of 35 to 40 students with just the teacher and sometimes a paraprofessional, but only with special education students. However, there are no funds to evaluate students. Some of my students are dropouts since the seventh grade. We have guys who only went to grammar school and are now 18. There are 1,500 students and only two guidance counselors. This is sad because the students need more attention. Class size needs to be reduced. Twenty-five instead of 35—I could know the students and follow up with individual attention.

"The mayor is saying 'I have my plan and I don't care what teachers and supervisors say.' Changes are being made top to bottom, bureaucratically. The school invested \$100,000 in musical instruments, and there are tons of art supplies, but they got rid of our art and music teachers. The city reduced the budget by 3 percent and these are not the academic basics.

"I have a lot of Latino students, but there is no real ESL [English as a Second Language]-licensed teacher. The reading teacher is doing ESL but more is needed than just knowing a little Spanish. There is a lot of anger among UFT [United Federation of Teachers] members to the leadership. We didn't hear anything from Randi [Weingarten, UFT president] in the first two or three critical months when they introduced the new curriculum."

As far as the union leaders were concerned, the City Hall rally was no more than a means of allowing their members to let off steam. No strategy was presented to the protesters, nor were any specific demands advanced. The platform was given over to various Democratic Party politicians, and New York State AFL-CIO President Dennis Hughes summed up the

officials' aims when he told the crowd, "The way we get this done is to stand together. That will give our leaders the opportunity they need."

The UFT and other city unions did nothing when the leadership of District Council 37, with 121,000 members the largest union of city workers, accepted a contract in April that imposed a two-tier wage system in which newly hired workers get 15 percent less than those currently working. UFT President Weingarten said that the contract should not be model for the teachers and uniformed services. While implying it was fine for the lower-paid workers in DC 37, she claimed that for her members the city needs to compete with the higher pay offered in the wealthier suburbs surrounding New York.



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