

As \$1 billion is earmarked for stadium

New York City teachers mark two years without a contract

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As the political establishment in New York City remains firmly focused on the profit-driven scramble to build a stadium for the Jets football team—at the cost of \$1 billion to taxpayers—the city’s 80,000 school teachers are marking the end of two years without a collective bargaining agreement.

While insisting that the city is too broke to afford any more funding for schools, Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration is prepared to hand over massive subsidies and valuable Manhattan real estate to fellow billionaire and Jets owner Robert Wood “Woody” Johnson IV.

This is the reality of political and social relations in New York. The gap between the city’s overwhelmingly poor and working class population, on the one hand, and the world’s greatest concentration of multimillionaires and billionaires, on the other, has never been greater.

Public policy is determined by the interests of this wealthy elite, at the expense of the majority. The city is ending the current fiscal year this month with a \$3.3 billion surplus, yet the Bloomberg administration is vowing no change in course from a fiscal policy based on budget austerity and tax cuts. Meanwhile, the trade union organizations that historically have claimed to represent the working class, including the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), have been reduced to impotence.

The lack of a teachers’ contract is only one of the symptoms of the abject neglect of the country’s largest public education system, situated in America’s wealthiest city.

The New York City schools system is failing. Its dropout rate has not dipped much below the most recent figure of 32 percent for 2001.

According to a 2005 City Department of Education (DOE) report following the class scheduled to leave high school in 2001, just over half of the students—52 percent—were able to graduate in four years. Graduation rates (including General Equivalency Diplomas [GEDs] achieved outside of school) rose to 63 percent in five years and 68 percent in seven years (when most had turned 21).

Only 34 percent of those who succeeded in graduating in the class of 2004 achieved a State Regents-endorsed diploma, for which students must pass tests in five subjects. Since 1997, when these high-stakes tests were phased in, the student dropout rate in the first four years increased from 16 percent to 21 percent—and it doubled for immigrant students—while GED programs had a 40 percent increase in 16- to-17-year-olds applying for entrance. The DOE acknowledged that “this trend is consistent with previous research showing a relationship between higher standards and lower school completion rates” (Flash Research Report #5, 2001).

The burden of testing also falls heavily on the elementary schools. Last year, there was an unsuccessful struggle to stop New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein from reintroducing a policy of forbidding “social promotion” for students who do not test at grade level in the third grade. This policy was extended to the fifth grade this year, even though the

2001 DOE report admitted, “Previous research has shown that students who are retained in grade because they did not meet reading and mathematics promotion requirements subsequently drop out of high school at higher rates than non-retained students.”

The media lauded the recent announcement that 60 percent of New York City fourth graders this year met state standards for reading and writing on the February English Language Arts (ELA) test. This compared to 50 percent last year, and was nearly twice the percentage in 1999.

The mayor, the chancellor, superintendents, principals and the teachers union all claimed credit for this increase. Less prominently publicized were criticisms that the scores were given a politically motivated boost in a mayoral election year. The new retention policies resulted in the districts with the highest gains being the ones with the most third graders held back last year and the most English Language Learners exempted from the ELA, according to Robert Tobias, former head of the DOE’s testing operations.

Certainly, some gain was to be expected, considering the enormous amount of time spent in classrooms teaching to the test, as well as the training of the teachers themselves in test preparation. The question of whether students were learning much beyond test taking was highlighted by the decline of eighth grade ELA scores by 3 percent from the already low 33 percent meeting standards.

Many parents and education workers support standardized testing in the belief that it will hold schools accountable for educating students. This was the stated rationale for President Bush’s 2001 “No Child Left Behind” Act (NCLB).

There are, however, more concrete interests behind the “reform” movement than the hopes of parents for their children. According to estimates by US Bancorp, NCLB will triple what was a \$300 million annual testing market. The publication of standardized tests is considered part of the market for instructional materials, which grew to \$3.4 billion in 2000. The market for tests has grown by an average of 7 percent a year for more than a decade. Education is second only to health care as a share of the US economy, accounting for nearly 9 percent of the gross domestic product. Private education companies attracted \$10 billion in investment over the last decade.

New York City has given Kaplan, the test-prep corporation, a \$1,485,000 contract for literacy and math coaches to provide test-taking training, siphoning off money needed to hire more classroom teachers.

In face of the disastrously inadequate education that is provided for much of the population, particularly the poor and the working class, educational “reform” advocates have turned to a one-sided and top-down solution of raising standards and establishing accountability through testing. This supposed remedy reflects the policies of a government that at all levels caters to the interests of the profit system and a wealthy elite at

the expense of the needs of the working class.

It is worth recalling the opening line of the Carnegie Forum report of 1983, which was seminal to the evolution of the educational reform movement: “Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.” From 1989, a strategy for this capitalist-centered view of education was developed by the Business Roundtable and its education agency Achieve that became the basis for NCLB.

The emphasis on test-driven education pushes the reorganization of schools to provide a workforce for corporate needs under established conditions of global competition. Rather than schools in which students love to learn and teachers love to teach, tests are used to instill fear, lower young people’s expectations, and create a pool of cheap labor by denying high school diplomas to large numbers of students.

Under conditions in which global corporations scour the world for cheap labor, skilled as well as unskilled, the ruling elite is not interested in doing more for schools than whip them into shape with testing. This motive accounts for the similar attacks on educational systems in many other nations.

The lack of adequate funding for the high-sounding aims proclaimed by the “No Child Left Behind” legislation has provoked opposition from the cash-strapped state governments that must implement the so-called reforms. The National Conference of State Legislatures issued a report criticizing the president’s education initiative as an overly rigid set of policies that undermines states’ efforts to educate students.

This opposition stems not from any conviction that tests are anti-educational and stifle the creativity of students and teachers, but from a mounting state deficit crisis. State revenues generate half of the \$500 billion spent by federal, state and local governments on primary and secondary schools in the US.

New York State has the second-largest debt in the nation, after the largest state, California. After two years, Chancellor Klein has ended a key initiative to equalize funding of city schools. “Absent additional financial resources, we didn’t want to have to take money from one school to bring another school up,” said Bruce Feig, the school system’s chief financial officer.

Emphasis by New York’s education administrators on test preparation, curriculum change and “professional development” for teachers has been used to camouflage the lack of funding for the most important solution to the needs of students: smaller classes to allow for greater individual attention to students. Next to socioeconomic status, class size is the most consistent factor correlating to student scores. Lowering the ratio of pupils to teachers would require major financing both for more schools to house more classrooms and for the training and hiring of more qualified teachers.

For the most part, class-size advocates approach the issue as if those responsible for policy were merely misguided in failing to tackle this overriding problem. In reality, corporate demands for cuts in taxes, and corresponding cutbacks in publicly funded services, dictate the overcrowding that is rife throughout the New York City school system.

A recent audit by the city comptroller revealed that, despite \$225 million in state aid and \$140 million in savings from reorganization of the school system, New York City’s schools lost more than 2,000 teachers from 2002 to 2004. The loss would be almost double if new literacy and math coaches were not counted.

As of May 31, teachers had worked without a contract for two years. The UFT bureaucracy has staged local protests, has launched a television commercial blitz and is holding a mass membership rally at Madison Square Garden on June 2 to plead with Bloomberg to negotiate.

What the union is incapable of doing, however, is to advance any independent or genuinely progressive alternative to the reactionary

education policies driven by the corporations and their political servants in the Democratic and Republican parties.

The UFT has often taken the initiative in making proposals intended to prove its usefulness to Bloomberg and Klein in imposing the corporate agenda, rather than beginning from the needs of students and teachers.

A recent example is the UFT’s proposal to organize two model charter schools. UFT President Randi Weingarten tries to blind the membership to the fact that no matter how well the union runs these schools, it will be legitimizing the charter movement in which a growing share of schools will be business ventures that siphon money from public education. The UFT bureaucrats perversely argue that the unions must win the charter school idea back from the right. They are only demonstrating how far to the right they themselves have traveled.

When the state legislature gave Mayor Bloomberg nearly unlimited control of New York City’s public schools in 2001, “we were among those who supported the measure in Albany,” admitted Weingarten in a March 18 New York Times joint op-ed article she wrote with neo-conservative education “reformer” Diane Ravitch.

Ravitch, who served as an education advisor to George W. Bush during his 2000 presidential campaign, has been brought forward as a prominent spokesperson for the union. A former assistant education secretary in Bush senior’s administration, she is a leading advocate of standardized testing and has endeared herself to the right through published attacks on “multiculturalism” and “political correctness.” In what amounted to an insult to the memory of America’s most prominent educational thinker of the twentieth century, Ravitch was given the union’s John Dewey Award this year.

In January 2003, Weingarten described Chancellor Klein’s “Children First” curriculum and reorganization plan as “music to teachers’ ears.” By May, she was saying he “just doesn’t get it,” as the city rejected a labor deal that included \$600 million in concessions by the Municipal Labor Council, the city employees’ union coalition led by Weingarten.

The UFT leader then unsuccessfully turned to the courts to prevent Bloomberg from laying off 846 paraprofessionals along with thousands of other city employees. The mayor blamed the layoffs on state budget cuts proposed by Republican Governor George Pataki, whom Weingarten had endorsed in the 2002 elections. He too was given the John Dewey Award that year.

Public education advocates campaigning against high-stakes testing and for smaller classes will have no more success than the union in wresting reforms from the political representatives of the ruling elite. Corporate America is not interested. It wants to expand a two-tier educational system—privately run, profit-producing schools, the better of which will educate a managerial and professional class, while poorly funded public schools teach children the discipline of drudge work or drive them away, reducing budgets further. This is a political system that would rather spend the money to send its children to kill and die in Iraq than provide them with decent schools.

The Bloomberg administration’s insistence that there is no money to significantly reduce class sizes or provide decent wages for teachers—though ample amounts exist for stadiums and tax cuts—is a manifestation of the subordination of every aspect of social life to the workings of the profit system.

The aspirations of teachers, parents and students themselves to defend and greatly enhance public education can be advanced only as part of a fight to mobilize the working class as a whole against big business and the two parties that it controls, the Republicans as well as the Democrats. Only through such an independent political struggle can the enormous wealth of society be mobilized to provide high-quality public schools for all and to meet other urgent social needs. This is the alternative fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the World Socialist Web Site.



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