

Union backs attacks on teachers in Washington, D.C.

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8 June 2010

With the backing of the main teaching unions, the government of the District of Columbia has pushed through a new contract for teachers that will see the destruction of workplace rights won over generations of struggle.

The negotiation of this sell-out contract is another betrayal of the workforce by the unions—who said they could mount no opposition to massive job losses in recent years, despite massive anger among teachers, because doing so would endanger the contract negotiations. Twenty-five public schools have been closed in the past three years, resulting in the sacking of hundreds of teachers and clerical staff. In 2008, the public schools system laid off 250 teachers and 500 other support staff. This was followed in 2009 by the dismissal of 230 more teachers.

In an expression of the lack of confidence in the unions to defend their interests, D.C. teachers voted 1,412 to 425 in favor of the new contract. The deal, which will come into effect this year, will impose performance-related pay and make it easier for the employer to fire teachers or move them from one school to another.

A key aspect of performance pay for teachers will be the test scores that their students achieve. This will mean teachers working with the poorest and most vulnerable youth, many of whom do not have English as a first language or have special educational needs, will be penalized by the tendency of test scores for their classes to be lower than those achieved in more-affluent areas. This will lead to teachers moving away from “low-performing” schools in poorer areas, further compounding the educational difficulties facing students there.

All this is of a piece with the program of the D.C. government, headed by Democratic Mayor Adrian

Fenty, and the wider agenda of the Obama administration, to ration education through market mechanisms. With dwindling resources allocated to education, exacerbated by the state and local budget crises brought on by the recession, schools are being forced to compete in a dog-eat-dog struggle for survival. Schools with lower test scores—and often the greatest educational and social needs—are to be starved of funds, while across the US billions of dollars of public monies are funneled into privately run charter schools, which can restrict access based on testing and other measures tending to exclude vulnerable youth.

Under the new contract, school principals and the chancellor of D.C. schools will be able to use their perception of job performance, rather than seniority, to lay off teachers or force them to work in another school. If a principal does not want a teacher reassigned to his or her school, that worker can be forced out of the District’s system. Displaced teachers with “good evaluations” are only to be granted a year’s “grace period” after which they are to be offered redundancy or, if they have 20 years’ experience, made to retire.

As a result, tenure, a right that teachers have fought for as a means to secure employment and prevent vindictive or politically motivated dismissal, has been virtually destroyed. As the *Washington Post* noted, tenure has been “redefined to affirm that it is only a due-process mechanism to protect against unfair dismissal, not a guarantee of a lifetime employment.”

These new measures will, however, empower management to victimize and ultimately dispose of teachers in low-testing schools, and those who voice criticisms or take workplace action to prevent further attacks on jobs or their pupils’ education.

The main union bodies representing teachers have played a crucial role in imposing this major setback for

D.C. teachers, which will set the tone for further attacks on teachers nationwide. The contract is the product of two and a half years of negotiations between the District government and the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU), the DC affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Though the AFT was less lavish in its praise for the sell-out contract, it played a vital role in disarming the District's teachers. The national union praised the inclusion of "professional development" schemes in the new contract as a concession, while carefully worked to prevent any disruption to the protracted negotiation process, even as scores of teachers were being laid off.

The union collaboration with the government in imposing the new contract should come as no surprise. Hundreds of teachers have been fired from the D.C. public schools system in recent years, and dozens of schools closed, without the WTU or AFT lifting a finger to defend their members or public education in general. As with every industrial issue across the country, and internationally, when it comes to imposing cutbacks, the unions only seek a place at the negotiating table in order to secure their position as the semi-official policemen of the workplace.

Expressing who the real beneficiary of the new contract is, Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee—a former adviser to President George W. Bush—praised the contract, saying that she had negotiated away very little of her original demands. School administrators would now have the "tools we need to staff the schools effectively," Rhee said.

The new contract provides for a 21.6 percent pay increase for teachers, to be phased in over five years. The rise includes a retroactive 11 percent increase for the period 2008-2010, the time in which the contract was negotiated. This means that all subsequent pay increases for the duration of the contract will likely barely keep up with the rate of inflation, while the total rise over the lifetime of the contract will only bring salaries for D.C. teachers in line with educators working in the city's suburbs.

Starting pay for a D.C. public school teacher with a bachelor's degree is currently just over \$42,000 per year, substantially less than the annual median household income in the US.

In another step toward the privatization of public education, performance bonuses that are being

introduced for teachers will be financed through donations from the private sector. Wealthy individuals, charities and companies can pay into privately run foundations, which will fund performance pay. These bonuses could amount to \$30,000 per year for a few teachers—far more than the pay increase promised in the contract—giving corporate America an even greater say in the running of schools.

Performance pay is also designed to divide teachers by forcing them to compete for bonuses, thus creating a two-tier workforce. Bonuses would be jeopardized if teachers took industrial action or other efforts to defend public education.

For Fenty, Rhee and both the Democratic and Republican parties, the D.C. contract signals a new stage in the class offensive against teachers, which will only lead to further attacks on pay and conditions.

In a June 3 editorial, the *Washington Post* stated that "rather than an ending, the labor pact...represents what could be a beginning in building and retaining a more effective teaching force." It praises the removal of "long-held prerogatives" such as seniority and tenure, which the editors claim protect "bad teachers." The only criticism the *Post* levels at the new contract is that the pay increase will be "fiscally challenging" and that it might disadvantage charter schools in the District.

The new contract is an attack on teachers, students, and the very principle of public education. To overturn these measures, to ensure well-paid and secure employment for teachers, and to go further and guarantee the best possible education for all children, it is necessary for teachers to make a complete break with the unions that have betrayed them time and again.

Across the country and around the world, teachers and their pupils are being forced to pay for the crisis of capitalism through givebacks, layoffs and school closures. Only a struggle by educators, students, parents and other workers for a socialist transformation of society can defend and advance the shared class interest in high-quality education for all.



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