

Buffalo, New York teachers oppose state evaluation plan

Tony Bell
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The New York State Department of Education is withholding \$5.6 million in aid to six low-performing schools in the Buffalo School District, demanding that the teachers at these schools be subject to an APPR (Annual Professional Performance Review).

The Buffalo Teachers Federation (BTF) rejected the evaluation plan because it would include the standardized test scores of students with poor attendance, special education needs and language difficulties, as well as English as a Second Language (ESL) students, in compiling a teacher's final competence rating.

Including the performance of second language students would have a big impact because as many as 40 nationalities attend some of the low-performing schools targeted for privatization or closure. Special Ed students may account for 30 percent of enrollment at others.

The State Education Commissioner received the latest BTF proposal negotiated by a small group of teacher delegates and promised the restoration of the funds pending acceptance by the 3,500 BTF members in a vote next week.

The original evaluation plan was only modified in the most cosmetic way, adding 2 points to a teacher's score in schools where 20 percent or more of the students are ESL. Although previously rejected by the teachers, the formulation including chronically absent students is basically unchanged.

Phillip Rumore, BTF president, had refused to sign the original agreement rejected by the membership, but has endorsed the latest one-year proposal. Along with the teacher reviews, three schools require the transfer of up to 107 teachers based on teacher replacement rules and may still be subject to outright closure.

Amber M. Dixon, Buffalo Public Schools interim superintendent, would have had Rumore bypass the rank-and-file opposition and sign the agreement, promising to

address teachers' concerns after the fact. As she vies for the position as the permanent superintendent, Dixon has openly endorsed the state's position that test scores of students who have had extensive absences should be included. Rumore has been more than willing to negotiate with the District Board.

The state APPR mandate finds its roots in the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" (RTTT) legislation. The APPR is a lever coinciding with the charter school model to replace public schools. It is aimed at voiding union contracts and the gains won by teachers in the past. The charter schools bypass many standard public school mandates and eliminate many hard-won gains protecting teachers' benefits, salaries and job security.

Both teachers and parents are being made scapegoats for the educational difficulties facing young people. By blaming parents and teachers for student academic problems, authorities seek to deflect attention from the effects of social inequality, poverty and systemic unemployment.

Buffalo and the western New York region has been part of a decades-long deindustrialization process that has seen Bethlehem and Republic Steel, Westinghouse, American Axle, Dunlop Tire, Trico, Dresser, and dozens of other manufacturing companies in printing, textiles, rubber and auto to close or leave the area.

The official regional unemployment rate is over 8 percent, but is actually much higher if one includes the underemployed or those discouraged from seeking work. The percentage of Buffalo households in poverty or near poverty is 44 percent. Those with incomes below \$15,000 stand at 27 percent (most include children); another 17 percent have incomes of \$15,000 to \$24,000 per year.

Students come to school hungry, with learning problems and medical needs that parents often cannot afford to address. Recently, the fares for bus and rail were increased, and routes to major shopping centers and

business parks into the surrounding suburbs have been severely cut or eliminated. All discounts for the disabled and the elderly have been removed. Over 20 percent of city residents rely on mass transit.

The relentless attack on public workers at every level, including educators, is only an extension of the massive wage and benefit cuts imposed in auto, steel and manufacturing over the last several decades.

BTF President Rumore is a long-time militant posturer who has relied heavily on the courts to resolve past contractual issues. In the present dispute, he can hide behind the powerful state apparatus imposing these mandates and absolve the union for its complicity in allowing the rise of charter schools, which are exempt from many of the regulations of the public system.

Buffalo teachers should continue the fight against the evaluation plan and APPR, and unite with other public service rank-and-file members to fight the savage cuts in education and other public services. This requires a break with the unions and their support for the two big business parties. The American Federation of Teachers, the BTF's parent organization, is a strong supporter of Barack Obama and his anti-teacher agenda.

The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the 2012 elections to advance a socialist program for equality, and against war and the attack on democratic rights, independent of the Democrats and Republicans. Phyllis Scherrer, the SEP's vice-presidential candidate, will be speaking at an upcoming meeting in Buffalo on "Socialism and the 2012 Election" to outline this perspective.

Public meeting

Sunday, June 17, 3:00 p.m.

Rust Belt Books

202 Allen Street

Buffalo, New York 14201



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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