

New York City mayor and UFT announce nine-year teachers' contract

Fred Mazelis
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New York Mayor Bill de Blasio and the city's corporate and financial establishment plan to use the tentative agreement announced May 1 between the city and the United Federation of Teachers to set a pattern for hundreds of thousands of city employees working without contracts.

The unprecedented nine-year contract has been hailed for granting the 100,000 teachers and other school employees, who have been without a contract for four and a half years, back pay of 4 percent for the years 2009-10. This is the same figure granted to most municipal unions before then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg declared that the city would not match it for the teachers.

A closer look reveals that even this back pay figure is tied to a host of concessions and qualifications. These explain why the contract has been met with general enthusiasm among "fiscal watchdogs" and other representatives of the ruling elite.

Back pay for the years 2009-10 will not begin to be paid until 2015, and the increases that have long been owed to the teachers will then be stretched out until 2020. Those employees who quit or are fired during this period will not receive this back pay. In addition, the city will save millions because of inflation in the ensuing years.

Furthermore, the members of the UFT will get no increase in pay for the current year, but only a \$1,000 lump sum payment. For the next three years, they will get an insulting 1 percent increase annually. Only in the last three years of the nine-year pact will they receive more "generous" raises of 1.5, 2.5 and 3 percent respectively.

The grand total adds up to an 18 percent increase over the nine years of the agreement. While official government statistics may pretend this is roughly equal

to the current inflation figure, the actual rise in the cost of living—as measured in increased medical costs, rent, higher education, not to mention food and other necessities—is far higher.

In exchange for the paltry wage hikes in the contract, the union has agreed to a number of significant givebacks that will be used to set a pattern for all city workers. Chief among these is the promise to come up with savings of \$1.3 billion in health care costs, chiefly through modifications of the prescription drug program as well as auditing of insurance claims. If these do not materialize, the mediator who worked on the negotiations will have the power to demand specific savings.

In addition, the contract provides for the kind of merit pay program that teachers have long denounced because it would lead to favoritism and driving a wedge into the workforce. So-called "high-performing" teachers, selected by principals to mentor others, will receive bonuses of between \$7,000 and \$20,000 a year under the agreement.

Another significant provision is one that allows 200 city schools to loosen long-established work rules to become "incubators for change," the kind of concession long sought by Bloomberg. And 1,200 teachers in the absent teacher reserve, most of whom have been laid off but who have continued to receive pay, would be asked to fill vacancies but could be let go after only one day if their principals deem them incompetent.

Equally significant is what the proposed contract does not include. There is of course no provision for billions of dollars to make possible smaller class sizes, new programs, facilities and equipment that would answer and defeat the efforts of the hedge fund billionaires to privatize education via charter schools.

It is abundantly clear that the tentative teachers' contract, while perfectly acceptable to Wall Street, is also aimed at defusing the pent-up anger among teachers and other city workers who have gone years without wage increases while the super-rich have flaunted their stolen wealth. The UFT agreement comes only two weeks after the announcement of a tentative contract between the city's 35,000 bus and subway workers and the state's Metropolitan Transportation Authority. That agreement is in many respects similar to the UFT pact, with pay increases of 8.5 percent stretched over 5 years.

Despite all the talk of tensions between Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio, they are playing identical roles, as reflected in the respective press conferences. Cuomo announced the transit deal at his New York office alongside Transport Workers Union President John Samuelson and de Blasio did the same with UFT President Michael Mulgrew.

Mulgrew gushed at the City Hall news conference, "This is a mayor who actually respects a work force." De Blasio returned the compliment, underscoring his policy of cooperation and "understanding."

The praise for the new contract from business circles was especially revealing. "The administration and the UFT have come up with a formula under which all city contracts can be funded within the existing city budget, without tax increases, while still offering competitive compensation and introducing critical reform of a health care insurance program for employees and retirees that the city can no longer afford," said Kathryn Wylde, CEO of the Partnership for New York City, a business group, according to the report in the *Daily News*.

"This is a good basis for discussion with the other unions," added Citizens Budget Commission President Carol Kellermann. "They should understand the fiscal realities the teachers union was able to see."

Both of these groups, among the most experienced and prominent mouthpieces of the establishment, even occasionally criticized the billionaire Bloomberg for his dealings with city unions. The fact that they are united in praise of de Blasio reflects their understanding that this "progressive" mayor has in fact been installed to deal with an angry workforce and is doing just that.

The UFT, which has already gone along with the push for charter schools, Obama's Race to the Top

program and the rating of teachers based on mandatory testing and similar measures, is tied to de Blasio and the entire system through its prominent support for and role in the Democratic Party. De Blasio's election, exploiting the growing disgust of sections of voters, was above all designed to more effectively impose the dictates of Wall Street under conditions of deepening crisis.

The support for the tentative teachers' contract stretches all the way from Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* to Juan Gonzalez, the *Daily News* columnist and co-host of the syndicated radio and television program "Democracy Now," who is the darling of many in the pseudo-left.

This nearly unanimous praise, virtually unprecedented in recent years, demonstrates the lineup of all the defenders of the profit system in opposition to the real needs of the vast majority. A vote in opposition to the proposed contract would reflect the legitimate anger of teachers. It must be linked to a new political strategy, however. The only way in which teachers and other city workers can defend their living standards and basic rights is through a break with the Democrats and the fight for a socialist program.



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