

# New York teachers voting on nine-year “reform” contract

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Five years after the last contract expired for 106,000 employees of New York City’s public schools, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) is mailing ballots out for the new contract proposal announced two weeks ago by Mayor Bill de Blasio and UFT president Michael Mulgrew.

De Blasio wants to use the teachers’ agreement, along with a similar agreement announced for the city’s transit workers, as a pattern for contracts for 200,000 other city workers.

The proposal undermines wages by stretching out an 18 percent increase over nine years. Most of the increase is back loaded into the later years of the contract despite the fact that teachers and other school employees have faced years of a de facto wage freeze while the cost of living increased.

Many teachers are equally concerned at the way the contract ignores or worsens working conditions, including recent changes to how and what they are obliged to teach, which have led to opposition over mandatory testing of students.

One provision establishes “lead teachers” assigned to mentor others in exchange for higher compensation, a form of “merit pay” long opposed by teachers. A centralized committee would nominate lead teachers. The confirmation of nominations would be solely in the hands of the principals, paving the way for favoritism while pitting teachers against each other.

A second “reform” is an incentive bonus of \$5,000 for teachers to work in difficult, high-needs, under-resourced schools, usually in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. This concept is premised on the continued acceptance of poverty in those communities and schools, where nothing would be done to provide smaller class sizes and other improvements, not to speak of fundamental changes in employment, housing and health care.

At the same time, 1,200 experienced teachers who have fallen into the Absent Teacher Reserve (ATR), teachers who are compelled to work as substitutes and rotated through successive schools, mostly because their schools were closed, would be offered an incentive to retire of about one week’s pay for each year taught, up to 20 years. If they decline, they may be fired if principals of two schools allege they are guilty of “problematic behavior,” an undefined charge which might only mean not teaching the way the principal demands. This establishes a precedent that can be expanded to discipline all teachers in the future.

Perhaps the most menacing provision is that to establish 200 PROSE (Progressive Redesign Opportunity Schools for

Excellence) schools. Billed as schools of “innovation,” they may be exempt from contractual work conditions—for example, through extended teacher work days and school years without increased pay. This would be a new way of legitimizing charter schools, where teachers already work longer for less pay.

New York, like New Orleans, Detroit and other cities, is moving towards ever-greater privatization. In Newark, New Jersey a third of public school teachers face layoff; 10 percent of the schools have been shut in Philadelphia and 50 closed in Chicago.

Mayor de Blasio and UFT President Michael Mulgrew have both postured as opponents of charter school expansion. This is a fraud. De Blasio is committed to making good on his promises to Wall Street that he will be “fiscally responsible” and make workers pay for the financial crisis that erupted in 2008.

De Blasio is continuing key policies of billionaire former Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Of the 45 school co-locations (public school buildings forced to “share” space with charter schools) initiated by Bloomberg at the end of his term, de Blasio approved 35. These included 14 privately run charter schools. At the same time, de Blasio has done nothing to reverse the layoffs and wage cuts suffered by school bus drivers, whose longstanding job protections were eliminated by Bloomberg in 2013. Their strike was shut down by the Amalgamated Transit Union after de Blasio and other Democratic mayoral candidates promised to “revisit” the issue once elected.

The main difference between the new mayor and his predecessor is de Blasio is eager to use the services of the unions to impose pro-corporate “reforms” that make teachers and students pay for the capitalist crisis. At the press conference after the contract’s announcement, de Blasio praised the collaboration of Mulgrew and the UFT, declaring, “These are all fundamental reforms, so Mr. Mulgrew was front and center in making those reforms happen.”

For his part, the UFT president presented the contract as a victory saying, the “bad ideas” of anti-teacher “education reformers” have now become “teacher-led innovations in our schools.”

Mulgrew now holds a gun to teachers’ heads, warning that a contract must be in place by a June budget deadline or money for retroactive pay would disappear. The UFT sent the Memorandum of Agreement—not the full contract—to school delegates only 24 hours before they voted on sending the contract out to the membership.

Teachers and other city workers do not even get to vote on the

huge issue of health care cutbacks, which was approved separately by the Municipal Labor Committee that includes the UFT. In line with Obama's push to cut "Cadillac" health care coverage for unionized workers, the agreement promised to find the city \$1.3 billion in savings, with an arbitrator otherwise being granted the right to impose out-of-pocket costs on the workforce.

In its betrayal, the union bureaucracy depends on the pseudo-left loyal "opposition" inside the UFT, particularly MORE (Movement of Rank and File Educators), which is affiliated with the International Socialist Organization and other pseudo-left organizations. After the deal, MORE said, "the city and UFT must go back to the drawing board" and that "whether or not this contract is ratified by the rank and file, remember this moment when UFT Elections come around again in 2016."

The MORE faction has no fundamental political differences with Mulgrew. Instead, it hopes to exploit anger over this latest betrayal to gain positions in the UFT bureaucracy. There it would function just as its supporters in the Chicago Teachers Union have, to block political opposition among teachers to the union, the Democratic Party and the capitalist system they defend.

The WSWS found no shortage of anger among teachers over the UFT-backed proposal. At Murray Bergtraum High School in Lower Manhattan, nearly every teacher who spoke with our reporters expressed their opposition to the tentative agreement.

John Elfrank, the chapter leader at Bergtraum, said, "Overall it is a step backwards for public education. The career ladder is merit pay and there is a nexus with the testing mania because people will have to justify their 'master teacher' gig with data. It is consistent with the overall corporate reform agenda. It is creating a new de facto charter school system.

"Randi Weingarten [president of the American Federation of Teachers] wants to take us out of collective bargaining, to be like the AMA, the American Medical Association, just providing benefits, management, and a lobby organization."

Another teacher at Murray Bergtraum, who asked to remain anonymous, expressed anger at the contract and at teaching conditions. "The UFT has let us down. The contract is punishing teachers with integrity and dedication. How about inflation? Why not give 100 percent retroactive pay—due in 2055! That is essentially what they are doing.

"I teach Economics and they are actually giving us a pay cut if you amortize the payments. This school is ground zero for what is wrong with the system. Whole departments are rated 'ineffective.' Special Education students are denied services. There is constant harassment of teachers."

Diane Washington is a guidance counselor at a school with pre-kindergarten to fifth grade classes. "I wish there would be more guidance counselors, a guidance counselor for every school. I have 500 students I take care of. I would like to see a push for guidance. They are taking away from education and social programs. We have an art teacher in our school but she is an ATR (Absent Teacher Reserve) substitute. She will not be there next year. The working people need culture. What they are doing is affecting and infecting the people at the bottom, not the people at the top."

Jesus Duran is an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. He explained, "It is supposed to be a raise, but it doesn't look like

a raise because we get nothing to start with. Then we get one percent and one percent and then only in 2015 do we start getting any kind of a raise. If we are getting retroactive pay, we should get it when the contract is signed, not in 2020.

"I've been reading the UFT material on merit pay, and it all sounds fine. But I am an ESL teacher. The problem with ESL and these students is that they are really learning English. As a result, I am going to have a difficult time showing increases in their test scores, and a difficult time getting any merit pay.

"I don't know about the health care takeaways. The union says it looks promising, but we don't know what it is. We should know what they are trying to take away before we vote on it. I may disagree with what they decide to take away from our health care because it might be something I am going to need later."

Another teacher said he was very upset with the contract. "We have had no raise in five years, and now they are paying us with our own money. If they had been paying us raises like they should have all along, we would have higher wages, a higher base and more money now.

"But they haven't paid us. They have been holding the money back. In another year, they will pay us what we already made. Factor in the inflation, and the strung-out eight percent retroactive pay is worthless, and not back pay at all. Our buying power is not increased anywhere along the line."

A school psychologist on the Upper West Side of Manhattan commented, "I don't like the way it is spread out and that we only see some more money in a year. The contract does not help support staff. What would help would be a change in SESIS (the flawed computer data system for students with special education needs, which was put in place two years ago). There are a lot of glitches and we spend a lot of time calling the help desk, and waiting for them to find the answers, and that is my job everyday. Before de Blasio was elected he said he would fix it, but nothing. I am in two schools, four days in one and one day in another, with 500 students to help."

These comments are a small indication of the anger among teachers and other public employees over their own conditions and the attacks on public services generally. The WSWS urges teachers to reject the proposed contract, but this is only the first step. What is needed above all is the fight for a new political strategy, breaking from the Democrats, including their loyal union backers, and fighting to unite the working class on a socialist program that can provide quality education along with decent jobs and living standards for all.



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