

# Teachers and transit workers ratify New York City contract deals

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New York City teachers have voted by a large margin to approve a nine-year contract with the city's Department of Education. The ratification, announced on June 3, followed by two weeks the approval of a similar long-term contract by the city's transit workers. Both agreements are being generally hailed in big business circles as "fiscally responsible" and helping to insure "labor peace."

Mayor Bill de Blasio, in office a little more than five months, can now claim that he has achieved what billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg could not. The administration is openly bragging that the teachers and transit agreements will set the pattern for other city employees who have been working for up to four years without contracts.

So-called fiscal watchdogs like the Citizens Budget Commission have pronounced themselves satisfied with the outcome of the protracted negotiations. The president of the CBC declared, in reaction to the teachers' contract, that the "prospective raises are fair and reasonable." She compared them favorably to the 4 percent increases granted under Bloomberg in his first term.

De Blasio was backed by a major section of big business precisely to work out these kinds of deals with the unions. The corporate and financial establishment can now rest assured, according to the mayor, that its profits have been protected while the trains run on time and the schools are not shut down.

The members of Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union accepted their five-year contract by a vote of 14,458 to 2,681, a margin of about 82 percent. The margin among the 90,000 members of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) was slightly smaller, at 77 percent.

The union brass and the media welcomed these vote

totals as signs of enthusiasm from the rank and file. "That is the largest yes vote in the history of Local 100," declared transit union president John Samuelsen. "Not one division voted it down."

In fact, behind the lopsided votes the mood among both teachers and transit workers is far from one of satisfaction. In the case of the transit workers, the actual number who voted yes amounts to only about 40 percent of the workforce. Of the 34,000 bus and subway workers in New York, about 10,000 are unable to vote because of unpaid union dues accumulated in the aftermath of the 2005 strike that was betrayed by the union leadership. Under the provisions of New York State's anti-strike Taylor Law, Local 100 briefly lost its ability to collect automatic dues deductions from workers' paychecks. Even though the workers owed relatively small amounts when the check-off was resumed, nearly one-third of the union membership did not pay up, essentially voting no confidence in the union to negotiate on their behalf.

As for the 40 percent who did vote to approve the proposed contract, many of these workers were also angry about the concessions included in the deal, but they saw no alternative. Along with increased health care costs, the package raises wages just eight percent over a total of five years, well below the anticipated official rate of inflation, let alone the real rise in the cost of living in New York City associated with food, housing, health care and education expenses.

The cost of the transit contract, moreover, will largely be paid by raiding the retiree benefits of workers on the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR), part of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), with about 6,000 workers represented by 60 craft unions. The LIRR pension fund was only 26.89 percent funded as of two years ago. Under federal pension legislation, funding

below 80 percent places the fund in endangered territory. On top of this, while federal mediators recently recommended that the LIRR workers should get wage increases of 17 percent over six years, the MTA is now expected to demand that these suggested increases be slashed in line with the New York City agreement.

As far as the teachers' contract, it was if anything worse than the transit deal. The nine-year agreement, which Mayor de Blasio and his aides played a crucial role in negotiating, includes major attacks on public education over and above the measly wage hikes that will leave teachers behind the rate of inflation. The contract includes just 10 percent in raises over the last seven years of the deal, along with back pay that is owing to the teachers from 2009-10, but which will not start to be paid until 2015 and stretch all the way until 2020.

Just as important, the United Federation of Teachers agreed to concessions that will set a precedent for future attacks. The union agreed that unless health care cost savings of \$1.3 billion are achieved, a mediator can mandate more specific cutbacks or health care premium increases. In addition, the schools will establish a merit pay program for "high-performing" teachers who will be chosen by principals to mentor others, and 200 city schools will be allowed to change work rules, further undermining gains that were achieved in the past.

Many teachers who voted for this deal were angry and disgusted, but the union, led by President Michael Mulgrew, was counting on the inexperience of younger teachers and the discouragement of older members. Mulgrew made a revealing comment after the vote, declaring that the teachers "[are] at an all time low in morale and yet they overwhelmingly voted to approve this contract." Indeed. The large vote to approve was not in spite of, but because of low morale, with teachers unable to see how to fight against the combined forces of the UFT apparatus and the de Blasio administration. And the cause of the low morale was the record of the union itself over many years.

Also playing important roles in both unions were the various pseudo-left union "activists" and caucuses. Samuelson himself is a graduate, so to speak, of the New Directions faction, in which the pseudo-lefts worked for years to cover up the political issues facing

the working class, continuously arguing that trade union militancy would be sufficient to defend wages and living standards. In the teachers' union, the MORE caucus, dominated by the International Socialist Organization, just carried out a "Vote No" campaign that called simply for the "reviv[al] of a tradition of rank and file activism."

The pseudo-lefts seek nothing more than securing union office themselves, where they will do their best to divert the growing anger of the working class into safe channels that do not challenge the profit system.

The claim that de Blasio's alliance with the unions will usher in an era of good feeling between the city and its workforce could hardly be more false. The latest union contracts will mean declining living standards alongside soaring poverty and inequality. Charter schools will continue to expand, the need for transit and other infrastructure improvements will be ignored and new attacks on pensions and other basic rights will be prepared. The gulf between Wall Street and the vast majority of workers, immigrants and youth will continue to widen under de Blasio, as it did under Bloomberg.

New struggles will inevitably erupt, and sooner rather than later. The most pressing need is for a political strategy, one that recognizes that only a united struggle of all sections of the working class against the plutocrats represented by both Democrats and Republicans is required. The task remains that of building a revolutionary leadership in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions and all of the fake "lefts" who are tied to the unions and the Democrats.



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