

High school students walk out to defend Philadelphia teachers

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Hundreds of students walked out of at least two Philadelphia high schools Wednesday morning to protest the cancellation of the labor contract covering 15,000 teachers and other public school employees in the city. Students carried signs denouncing attacks on their teachers' health care benefits and working conditions and told reporters they would strike until the contract was restored.

The protests occurred two days after the bipartisan School Reform Commission (SRC) revoked the contract with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and announced it would unilaterally cut health care benefits for active and retired teachers. On Wednesday, the city's Democratic mayor, Michael Nutter, declared his support for the attack, saying, "The action, unfortunately, was necessary." He reiterated the bogus claim by the state's Republican governor, Tom Corbett, that the money taken from teachers would be used to improve schools.

"In the 21st century, it becomes increasingly untenable that folks aren't paying something for their health care coverage and for a variety of other benefits," Nutter said. "At the moment, those are the only other additional dollars that are available to the school district."

This was echoed by former Governor Ed Rendell, another Democrat, who said, "The education of our kids depends on significant savings coming from the contract."

Students demonstrating outside the Philadelphia High School of Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA) and Science Leadership Academy (SLA), two of the district's top magnet high schools where the walkouts were centered, rejected this lie.

"They say 'we're taking the teachers' money and we're giving it back to the schools so the students can

get books and pencils and paper,'" CAPA junior Cy Wolfe, who helped organize the protests on social media, told the local *CBS News* affiliate. "We don't want those things if we don't have good teachers. You know, the good teachers, they can go to other schools and get their jobs and we don't want that to happen," he said.

"They treat them like they're expendable," Doran Yarden, a CAPA student, told *Newsworks*, a local media outlet, as he and other band members played their instruments and shouted slogans at passing cars.

"We're striking because every single teacher in the district's benefits are at risk and [are] being played with through politics," protest organizers said in a Facebook post.

The financial crisis of the Philadelphia schools, like those of public schools around the US, is not caused by supposedly unsustainable health and pension benefits. Instead it is the product of decades of corporate tax breaks, the loss of revenue following the 2008 crash and state and federal budget cuts. Governor Corbett has cut \$1 billion in state funding, which has cost the Philadelphia schools \$250 million, or \$1,300 per student.

The five-member SRC was formed in 2001 to oversee the state takeover of Pennsylvania's largest school district. It includes three members appointed by Governor Corbett and two by Mayor Nutter.

The SRC chairman is City Council member William Joseph Green IV, a former bond trader and the son and grandson of two former Democratic mayors in Philadelphia. A proponent of school vouchers and the complete charterization of the city's public schools, Green made it clear all along that he was prepared to unilaterally revoke the contract if talks failed.

The state's antidemocratic Act 46, which established

the SRC, specifically bans strikes by Philadelphia teachers who are threatened with the loss of their certifications if they walk out. Nevertheless there is widespread sentiment among teachers for a strike. There is popular support for such a struggle after years of school closings and budget cuts, which have left the schools understaffed and undersupplied.

After imposing repeated wage freezes, work rule changes and other concessions, the SRC is now demanding that teachers pay an additional out-of-pocket expense of \$200 a month for family medical coverage, while retirees will lose their insurance altogether starting in December.

In the face of this attack, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers has done everything it can to block any mass struggle. The PFT, which has offered more than \$22 million in health care concessions, has insisted it would restrict any opposition to the courts, a move designed to undermine the resistance of teachers.

PFT President Jerry Jordan has sought to conceal this betrayal behind demagogic statements about teachers not being “indentured servants” and that the union was “not taking anything off the table.”

Not only has the PFT opposed any mass demonstrations, let alone strikes, it has refused to even call a mass membership meeting, fearing the angry opposition of its own members. On Wednesday, the union held a virtual “town hall meeting” instead, which members could only access via their cell phones.

In a statement responding to the SRC decision, Jordan wrote, “In August 2013, the PFT put contract proposals on the table that would have saved the district millions of dollars and averted the current budget deficit. Governor Corbett’s SRC is clearly not interested in negotiating with the educators of Philadelphia. They have been spending vast amounts of time and money on union-busting strategy sessions with their lawyers, and not nearly enough time working with the PFT on how to restore programs and services to our schoolchildren.”

Indeed the PFT has “worked with” state and local officials to impose the closing of more than 30 schools and the layoff of 4,000 teachers in the last few years alone. Its only complaint now is that the SRC is imposing these attacks “unilaterally” and threatening the union’s control over a multimillion-dollar health and welfare fund.

The PFT and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, have promoted the lie that the replacement of Governor Corbett by his Democratic challenger Tom Wolf in next month’s election would improve public education and the conditions of teachers. In reality, Wolf is a multimillionaire representative of the same corporate and financial interests that are attacking public education all over the country.

The attack on public education by the Democrats, from Nutter, Green and Rendell in Pennsylvania to Obama and Arne Duncan on the national level, demonstrates that the starting point for any genuine struggle is a political break with this big business party and the unions that are aligned with it.



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