

“We protested because we love our teachers and our education”

Students, workers denounce attack on Philadelphia teachers

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17 October 2014

There is widespread support in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for the 15,000 public school teachers and other school employees whose contractual rights were revoked October 6 by the School Reform Commission (SRC), an unelected agency overseeing one of the United States’ largest school districts.

On October 9, hundreds of students at the High School for Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA), the Science Leadership Academy (SLA) and Franklin Academy walked out of their schools to protest the attack on their teachers. The attack includes imposing hundreds of dollars in monthly health care costs on teachers and eliminating retiree medical coverage altogether.

Anger has been building for years against brutal budget cuts. In 2012, there was an outpouring of popular anger over the decision by the SRC to close 23 public schools and lay off nearly 4,000 teachers, as part of the push to expand the number of charter schools in the district.

The commission’s actions enjoy the backing of state and local politicians, including Pennsylvania’s Republican Governor Tom Corbett, the city’s Democratic Mayor Michael Nutter and former city councilman and now SRC Chair Joseph William Green, a long time Democratic from one of the city’s most prominent political families. On the national level, President Obama, who has spearheaded corporate-backed “school reform,” supports the attack on Philadelphia teachers.

While teachers, students and workers are looking for a way to fight, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and other city unions have done everything to dampen opposition and prove to the political establishment that they can be relied upon to impose deep concessions on teachers and other workers. In an op-ed piece in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* Thursday, PFT President Jerry Jordan insisted that the union was ready to negotiate a “fair contract” with the SRC, which would include tens of millions of dollars in concessions. Jordan wrote the PFT had put \$24 million in health care cost

savings on the table last year and had also offered to “forgo wage increases for one year, which would have saved an additional \$10 million.”

He castigated officials for not working with the unions to resolve the financial crisis. The unions have sought to channel anger behind worthless appeals to the court to overturn the SRC action. The union has also claimed that the election of Democrat Tom Wolf in next month’s gubernatorial election would improve conditions for teachers.

On Thursday, the PFT held a rally that featured various Democratic politicians who postured as friends of the teachers, while covering up the bipartisan character of the SRC attack. The *Inquirer* reported Wednesday that union officials in two meetings last week had specifically rejected calling a citywide general strike to defend the teachers. “Jerry Jordan, president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, told the group that he wanted to exhaust legal remedies first,” the newspaper reported, “and the leaders decided to await the outcome of the Nov. 4 gubernatorial election.”

Any talk of a general strike from the union bureaucrats was for show only. However, there is deep sentiment throughout the city—where teacher and transit strikes were regular occurrences in the 1970s and 1980s—for a common struggle. Any such struggle would require the initiative of workers in opposition to the unions and the Democratic Party.

Earlier this week, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with students and school employees in Philadelphia whose determination to fight stood in stark contrast to the unions.

Deja-Nyia is a junior at Science Leadership Academy, a magnet high school with 465 students. Explaining the October 8 action by students, she said, “We were protesting how the SRC held a meeting in private and took 10 percent of our teachers’ health insurance. The students protested because the teachers couldn’t since they would lose their

teaching certification if they struck. “If it weren’t for the budget cuts, we and the teachers wouldn’t be in this position. Last year Governor Corbett cut so much from the state budget. Teachers make little to nothing and haven’t had a raise in five years. Now they will have to pay \$500 a month or more for health insurance when they are already paying for our school supplies out of their own pockets. The media makes it seem like the teachers haven’t given up anything, but it’s the governor and the SRC who are causing these cuts.”

The WSWs also spoke to students at the High School for Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA). Dotan, a sophomore, said, “I participated in the student boycott of school in support of the teachers. It is really about how we treat the teachers. The people who control everything are the millionaires and billionaires. They will never make laws against themselves.”

Taylor is a 10th grade vocal major at CAPA. She told the WSWs, “I protested, and everybody was outside the school protesting because they are taking away our teachers’ health care when they do so much for us like buying us supplies, textbooks and even clothes. “The teachers deserve more than what the government says. I blame Governor Corbett and even though I have respect for Obama, I feel the attack on our teachers is not helping us get the education we need.

“This isn’t the first time they’ve cut education. We all used to get transit passes so we get to school for free on public transportation. They made cuts to certain schools so some students have to pay to get to school. School supplies have also been cut. They also laid off a lot of teachers last year. Now classrooms in elementary school have 45 kids and they don’t have enough desks, chairs or supplies. This goes along with many schools being closed down. This has taken a toll on the students.

“There were at least 170 students out in front of CAPA to protest with banners, signs and chants. We said to drivers passing by, if you care about what is happening to education, honk your horn. Most of them honked back. One of the whimsical banners said, ‘This is what happened without teachers,’ and it was filled with misspelled words. The teachers were fine with the demonstration.”

Three CAPA students who perform together as vocalists—Shana, Michael and Imani—also stopped to discuss the situation. Shana, a junior, said, “The government needs to hear what is being said. The US should be a ‘city on a hill.’ Intervening in other nations only makes us worse.”

Imani, who is also part of the graduating class of 2016, added, “The government is not about fixing the country. Most things are about money.” Shana added, “We should have social medicine. It should come out of taxes and should be at the point where homeless people, everyone, can get

health care. We would not have diseases like Ebola. If we stopped going to war and building prisons there would be money. They are saying, ‘we have no hope for you’ when they cut hundreds of millions from Philadelphia schools. In the US, education is on your own. In Switzerland you can go for two years, and they will give you free education. We protested because we love our teachers and our education.” Michael noted, “People with all the money are not taxed like those without. Money comes first in America. Art is secondary.”

The WSWs also spoke to Samantha, a food service worker for the Philadelphia School District at E.M. Starter Elementary School. She denounced the SRC action, saying, “It is wrong. They claim they have no money for the teachers, and we food service workers are not getting our right pay. Our checks are smaller. The union says it is trying to get us a higher rate and more hours. I started last year but it has been going on since I started.”

Londra, a school bus driver for five years, said, “They have made big attacks against school bus drivers. They take money out of my paycheck. It is like I am paying to work. In order for them not to lay anyone off, we had to give back a certain percentage of pay. “Teachers are against agreeing to any givebacks. They feel like they gave enough already. Where did all the money go? They pay a lot of rich people—to do what? The problem is we don’t stand strong enough together. We don’t strike. When I was younger, I saw strikes a lot. No one is fixing this economy. That is what they thought when a black man came in to be president, that he would fix things. He hasn’t.”

Mr. Ramelself, a bus driver for Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) was waiting to begin his run starting near CAPA. He said, “We went through the same thing five years ago. A lot of concessions were made so we would not have to pay for health plans out of our pockets. When the media says the teachers don’t want to share the sacrifices, they ignore that the teachers, like us, have been sacrificing for years. As for the unions, they just want union dues.” Pete is a teacher who retired from the public schools and now teaches at Delaware Chancellor High School, a private school near CAPA. He said, “Politicians like Wolf and Corbett, they all have money. Basically they are the same. One talks out of one side of his face, the other out of the other side. The SRC is a bunch of turkeys. There will not be change with the Democrats.”



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