

Philadelphia unions use teachers' rally to promote Democrats

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Ten days after the bipartisan School Reform Commission (SRC) unilaterally revoked the labor agreement covering 15,000 Philadelphia teachers and other school employees, city unions called a protest rally outside of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) headquarters last Thursday, October 16.

Some 3,000 teachers, parents, students and other city workers participated in the rally in a demonstration of the popular anger over the provocative attack. Many held signs denouncing the SRC and Republican governor Tom Corbett who has slashed an estimated \$1 billion from state educational funding.

The perspective and policies advanced by the union officials at the rally, however, were not aimed at mobilizing the working class to break the isolation of the embattled teachers. On the contrary, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers President Jerry Jordan and other union officials promoted the lie that appeals to the courts and the replacement of Corbett with his Democratic challenger in next month's election would advance the struggle of the teachers.

"Philly is ground zero for injustice," Weingarten declared, saying that Governor Corbett "has decided to make a war on public education." Jordan said, "Tell everyone you know to vote—and you know who to vote for!"

By focusing their criticism on the Republicans, the union officials deliberately concealed the role of the Democrats in the attack on teachers in Philadelphia and nationally. SRC Chairman Joseph William Green and Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter are prominent Democrats who are demanding teachers pay hundreds of dollars in monthly out-of-pocket expenses for health care, after years of budget cuts and concessions. The Obama administration, which is spearheading the attack

on education nationally, is funding the expansion of charter schools in Philadelphia, which has been designated as a "promise zone."

After the rally, the union sent teachers into the SRC meeting to protest, while giving a platform for various Democrats to pose as friends of workers. State Senator Christine Tartaglione called the SRC's move "a disgrace" and said when the legislature reconvenes in January, "My first piece of legislation is going to be to abolish the SRC."

For his part, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Tom Wolf has criticized the SRC's "unilateral actions" and called for more active "collaboration" between "all stakeholders"—a euphemism for the inclusion of union leaders in decisions to cut funding. He has also pledged to further enact charter school reforms in the city where a third of all students are already enrolled in such schools.

The Philadelphia unions accept without question that teachers must pay for the financial crisis in the school district that has been created by corporate tax cuts and reductions in state and federal funding. Jordan made it clear the PFT was fully prepared to impose tens of millions of dollars in health care and pay concessions. His only complaint was that the SRC had circumvented the union and imposed the givebacks unilaterally. It was "an absolute lie to say that we are unwilling to negotiate around health care," Jordan said at the rally.

In a statement the day after, Jordan urged the labor relations board to overturn the unilateral action, saying, "We're hoping for a quick resolution that brings this matter where it belongs—back to the bargaining table."

There is widespread support for a fight against these attacks. Teachers in the city have been working for over a year under the terms of an expired contract. In addition, years of budget cuts by both big business

parties have led to the shutdown of dozens of public schools, the slashing of thousands of teachers' jobs, and cuts in pay and benefits.

Sensing the sentiment for a struggle, union officials raised, entirely insincerely and solely for show, the issue of a citywide general strike. If the courts did not rule in favor of the PFT, Patrick Eiding, president of the Philadelphia Labor Council AFL-CIO, declared, "We will turn this city upside down. We'll see you in the streets if it's not taken care of." AFSCME hospital workers union president Henry Nicholas, who has made a career of such demagoguery, echoed Eiding.

An article published last week by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported on two meetings of city union officials, which explicitly rejected a citywide strike. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 98 President John Dougherty told the *Inquirer* that after "a thorough vetting we decided to go out and get Tom Wolf elected," rather than call a strike. Also rejecting the idea, Jordan insisted that the union focus on "legal remedies."

Since the SRC decision, the unions have done everything to suppress opposition by the working class even as walkouts by hundreds of high school students demonstrated the possibility for such a struggle. The first move of the PFT was to instruct teachers to stand in front of schools, before classes started, in a demoralizing exercise of handing out leaflets insisting that teachers were willing to accept deep concessions. Now they are insisting that the energy of teachers be directed to fruitless and self-destructive appeals to the courts and the Democratic Party.

This effort to bamboozle teachers has been aided by various pseudo-left organizations, which promote the unions and the Democratic Party. This includes the International Socialist Organization (ISO) whose leading member, Jesse Sharkey, played a key role in the betrayal of the 2012 Chicago teachers strike and is currently the interim president of the CTU.

In its first and only article on the Philadelphia teachers, the ISO's *Socialist Worker* web site covered up for the PFT and echoed the union's focus on the Republican Party, saying that "[m]any people are also looking to the November 4 gubernatorial elections as a source of relief."

While admitting that the Democratic Party, at least at the city level, has been complicit in the attacks on

education, the article draws no broader conclusion, leaving the fate of teachers entirely in the hands of the union bureaucracy.

A similar article was posted on the web site of Kshama Sawant's Socialist Alternative, which hailed the left-posturing of union officials, saying "The first instinct of the outraged union officials was right: there should be a one-day general strike of city workers in Philadelphia ." However, they lamented, the union leaders were "unfortunately" relying on the courts and Democrats instead.

The bitter experience of teachers throughout the country—including the defeat of the Chicago teachers strike, which paved the way for the shutdown of 50 schools and the destruction of thousands of teachers' jobs—has proven that the trade unions are hostile to any genuine struggle to defend public education.

Officials like Weingarten (who made more than \$500,000 last year) and Jordan are allied with the Democratic Party and enemies of public education like Bill Gates. They are not opposed to corporate-backed school reform but only insist that it is carried out with the collaboration of the unions. They share the same capitalist outlook as the big business politicians, insisting that there is "no money" for teachers, education and other social needs, while trillions are poured into the financial markets and the government's war machine.

The starting point of any genuine struggle by Philadelphia teachers is a complete break from the PFT and other city unions and the development of an independent industrial and political struggle by the working class against the Democratic and Republican parties and the profit system they defend. The resources needed for the vast improvement of public education will only be found if the working class breaks the dictatorial grip of the banks and big corporations and reorganizes society to meet human needs, not private profit.



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