

Judge orders Philadelphia officials to negotiate school cuts with teachers union

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Last week, Judge Nina Wright Padilla of Philadelphia's Common Pleas Court issued an injunction barring Philadelphia's School Reform Commission (SRC) from unilaterally overriding a union contract between the school district and 15,000 city teachers. Judge Padilla told school officials and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) to engage in "expedited labor arbitration" to reach a deal, which both sides agree will force teachers and other school employees to accept health care and other concessions.

Earlier this month, the SRC—which is made up of unelected officials appointed by the Republican governor and Democratic mayor—revoked the teachers' contract and paved the way for teachers to pay thousands in annual out-of-pocket expenses for health care. Under the judge's injunction, school officials and union representatives will now negotiate for a 60-day period, effectively cancelling the December 15 deadline previously set by the SRC to impose the health care payments.

Well aware that the unilateral action by SRC has provoked widespread anger—with student walkouts and a protest of thousands of teachers—the judge has opted to use the services of the PFT and other city unions, rather than circumvent them, to achieve the aims of the corporate and political establishment. The PFT has proved again and again that it can be relied on to force teachers to pay for the financial crisis. In the last few years alone, the PFT has been instrumental in suppressing opposition by teachers, parents and students to the shutdown of dozens of schools, thousands of teacher layoffs and wage and benefit cuts.

PFT leaders lauded the judge's ruling, with President Jerry Jordan declaring that the decision was "a testament to the notion that these kinds of contract changes should be decided at the bargaining table."

Jordan reiterated the union's commitment to working with the school district to arrive at concessions, but preferred that they be done "via face-to-face negotiations."

Union leaders had previously offered nearly \$35 million in concessions during negotiations, which reached a standstill last summer. Jordan signaled the PFTs' continued willingness to impose such cuts on teachers in numerous public statements, including an opinion piece published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which insisted that, while not being as "draconian" as those cuts demanded by the SRC, "the concessions offered... by the union would have required further sacrifice for PFT members."

While supporting attacks on teachers it allegedly represents, the PFT officials are opposed to the SRC's threat to take control of the union's lucrative health care fund, a move that would no doubt threaten the income of the upper middle class union executives themselves.

PFT officials have filed a parallel lawsuit in an attempt to have the Pennsylvania Department of Education removed from the dispute in order to keep the matter within city courts as a measure to preserve its interests.

For their part, school district officials have indicated that they intend on appealing the decision. "We consider it to be a temporary hold," said Philadelphia schools' spokesman Fernando Gallard to *NBCPhiladelphia*. "We're going to take other legal actions and appeal immediately," he added.

Last week the PFT and the metropolitan AFL-CIO held a protest that sought to channel popular anger behind the electoral campaign of Democrat Tom Wolf for state governor. Wolf, who enacted a series of pro-corporate measures as a member of then-Democratic

governor Ed Rendell's Business Tax Reform Commission, has promoted the expansion of charter schools and other attacks on public education. At the same time, he has urged school officials to include the PFT as a "stakeholder" in negotiations for budget reduction.

The all-out support for the Democrats by the teachers unions has nothing to do with defending teachers. President Obama and his education secretary Arne Duncan have spearheaded the attack on teachers and public education through Race to the Top and other corporate-backed "school reform" measures. On the state level by Democratic governors, like New York's Andrew Cuomo, Illinois' Pat Quinn and California's Jerry Brown, have done the same, as have Democratic mayors Chicago's Rahm Emanuel and Philadelphia's Michael Nutter.

The support for the Democrats is entirely driven by the defense of the interests of the union apparatus. Executives like AFT President Randi Weingarten (who made more than \$500,000 last year) and National Education Association (NEA) President Dennis Van Roekel (\$411,000), hope the Democrats will continue to use the unions as "partners" in the corporate restructuring of education.

While tens of millions of teachers and other workers have nothing but disgust for the big business politicians running in the mid-term elections, a story published this week in *Education Week* noted the NEA and AFT are pouring "record-setting" amounts into the coffers of state Democrats. "We're doubling down on gubernatorial and down-ballot races this year," said Weingarten. According to filings with the Federal Election Commission, the NEA and AFT are on track to donate over \$60 million through various super-PACs controlled by the unions this election cycle, even as candidates from both parties move ever further to the right.



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