

Boston teachers face contract fight over job security, working conditions

John Marion
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As the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) contract with the Boston Public Schools (BPS) nears expiration on August 31, the 4,500 teachers covered by it face a fight for their jobs and for the future of public education in the city.

The assault on teachers' job security, pensions, health insurance, and wages will be accompanied by a ballot initiative in November—backed by corporations like Fidelity Investments, Bank of America, and Bain Capital—to increase the cap on the number of charter schools across Massachusetts.

A particularly predatory clause in the charter school referendum stipulates that school districts that score in the bottom 25 percent on standardized tests will have priority in the drive for charters. Grandstanding by the Boston City Council, which has voted to oppose the referendum, will not stop the multimillion-dollar statewide advertising campaign already begun by pro-charter foundations.

This year, 40 of the 43 collective bargaining agreements for Boston city workers are up for renewal. Teachers, janitors, cafeteria and other BPS staff have powerful allies in the working class to link up with their struggle. This is not the outlook, however, of the BTU, which is conducting secret negotiations on the contract with the city and preparing to accept deep concessions on teachers' jobs and working conditions.

As of August 23, BTU President Richard Stutman told WBUR that the union still had not made a wage proposal to the city. During the last negotiations, teachers had to go two years without a raise, as a contract effective September 1, 2010 was not ratified until November 2012.

In the previous six-year contract, the city's contribution to teachers' health care premiums was reduced from 88 percent to 85 percent, while its contribution to "point of service products" (prescriptions) was cut from 84 percent to 80 percent.

One hundred sixty-five jobs, or 1 percent of the total workforce, are being cut in this year's budget. In each of the past three school years, more than 100 experienced teachers have started the year without their own classroom because of

an "excessing" procedure spelled out in the contract.

While the procedure guarantees a salary for "excessed" teachers, this is now coming under attack. The BPS "Office of Human Capital" is allowing school principals to hire outside teachers—leading to the "excessing" of existing teachers—while the *Boston Globe* bemoans the \$8-10 million spent each year on the salaries of the "excessed."

The corporations that are pushing for an expansion of charter schools contributed only 10 percent of the state's tax revenues last year. The regressive sales tax, in contrast, accounted for 23 percent.

Fidelity Investments President Abigail Johnson, who has contributed to the \$2.3 million August ad campaign in favor of lifting the charter cap, is worth more than \$13 billion. Expropriating even 10 percent of her wealth would enable a generous increase in the BPS budget. John Henry, the former commodities trader who now owns the *Boston Globe*, is worth \$2.4 billion.

Michael O'Neill, the chairman of the School Committee, is also executive vice president of financial services at 451 Marketing, with a "focus" on "banks, mutual funds, asset management, equity, wealth management and...insurance," according to the company's web site. BPS Superintendent Tommy Chang's Chief of Staff Makeeba McCreary is a former consultant for the pro-charter, Walton Foundation-supported Families for Excellent Schools, according to Alternet.

The total BPS budget for fiscal year 2017 includes an increase of only \$18.5 million, or 1.8 percent. Almost eight times this amount in city, state, and federal perks was promised to General Electric at the beginning of this year when it agreed to move its corporate headquarters to Boston. Democratic mayor Marty Walsh, who started his political career in the building trades unions, was a champion of that deal.

An expansion of charter schools would lead to a vicious cycle, as resources are drained from public schools that would then be accused of "underperforming." Republican Governor Charlie Baker—who is pushing the referendum

known as Question 2—has already underfunded state reimbursements to Boston for revenues lost to existing charter schools.

Teachers, parents and students, however, should have no illusions that the Democratic Party, which controls both houses in the state legislature and has collaborated with Baker on the funding, will take up their fight in defense of public education. Former two-term governor Deval Patrick, a Democrat who previously served as a US assistant attorney general in the Clinton administration, is now a managing partner at Bain Capital, one of the major backers of charter schools.

Behind claims about “innovation,” “school autonomy,” and “excellence” in the Boston schools, politicians and their corporate supporters are utilizing a variety of tactics to boost the charter school movement. According to *Politico*, a group calling itself Public Charter Schools for MA is planning to spend more than \$6 million on advertising in support of Question 2, starting seven weeks before the November election.

Other tactics include using charter and “turnaround” schools as a means of gutting longstanding job security provisions in the teachers’ contract. A June 2014 report called “The Path Forward: School Autonomy and Its Implications for the Future of Boston’s Public Schools,” prepared for The Boston Foundation and the BPS, touted ““elect-to-work”” agreements used by Denver schools to “offer employees one-year contracts that supersede the multi-year collective bargaining agreement.” These are work contracts for individual teachers, rather than contractual rights in a union contract, setting teachers up for layoff at the whim of individual school administrators.

The current BTU contract makes teachers permanent after three years of service, but “The Path Forward” report includes a graph of the growth of “autonomous” schools—including In-District Transformation, Innovation, Turnaround, Horace Mann Charter, and Pilots—in Boston. While less than 10 percent of students attended such schools in 1995, that proportion had grown to 32 percent in 2014. The report also advocated for “transitioning to a purchased services model” (in other words, privatization) for food services.

A “Special Report” issued August 22 by the Boston Municipal Research Bureau also argues for “mutual consent” in hiring and “fiscally responsible teacher compensation.” A sidebar in this report, which lays out a blueprint for attacks to be used by the BPS in the contract negotiations, thanks “the Research Bureau’s Cabinet Members for their generous support” and includes in the list BNY Mellon, Citizens Bank, Comcast, Verizon, Fidelity Investments and State Street Corporation. As the teacher’s

struggle develops in opposition to the dismantling of public education, both big business parties and the BTU will dance to the tune of these “generous supporters.”

Over the past year, teachers, students and parents have protested the BPS budget cuts and attacks on public education. On March 9, thousands walked out of middle school and high school classes to protest cuts being planned in the fiscal year 2017 BPS budget. On March 23, hundreds of students, parents, and teachers packed a hearing room as the School Committee considered the fiscal year 2017 budget, many waiting for hours to speak against the cuts. And again on May 23, more than one thousand students walked out of classes.

Although these actions have been met by condescension from Mayor Walsh—who said that parents involved in the student walkouts should “act like adults”—parents and students have continued to protest the cuts that will leave many schools without libraries, full-time nurses and adequate funds for special education and other vital services.

The city and School Committee are perpetuating the lie that there are not enough resources to provide free and high-quality public education to all children and the BTU is following suit. The Preamble to the union’s current contract states that “the parties...accept their responsibility for doing as well as possible with the resources now available” and stresses “the need for a collaborative working relationship” with management.

Teachers, their fellow school workers, students and parents should reject the entire framework of this argument. The budget cuts and concessions to charters should be rescinded, not deepened. Billions in new funding should be provided to guarantee teachers’ jobs, health care and secure retirement and provide public education to all students as a social right, including libraries, nutritional lunches, and the opportunity to participate in sports and the arts.



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