

Cleveland teachers threaten walkout as school year begins

Jerry White
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More than 5,300 teachers and support staff could go on strike in Cleveland, Ohio on Thursday, September 1, at 6 p.m. Teachers have been working 11 months without a contract and are opposing the district's "pay for performance" scheme, which compensates teachers entirely based on standardized test results.

A walkout could affect 38,700 students enrolled in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), the second largest district in the state behind the state capital of Columbus. CMSD is the only district in the state under the direct control of a city mayor, who appoints the school board.

Teachers voted overwhelming for strike action last May, but the Cleveland Teachers Union (CTU) did not call a walkout when the contract expired on June 30. The school year began on August 15 and the day after the CTU executive board voted unanimously to authorize a strike September 1.

There are several other school districts where teachers are working under expired contracts, including Chicago and Boston. Both districts are demanding deep concessions from teachers in line with the pro-corporate "school reform" agenda that has been spearheaded by the Obama administration and backed by both big-business parties.

There is enormous opposition to the attack on public education on the part of teachers, parents and students. At the same time the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates are doing everything to prevent strikes that would disrupt their campaign for the election of Hillary Clinton, who is committed to escalating Obama's anti-education policies while relying on the AFT and NEA to suppress opposition.

Cleveland is the second poorest big city in America, trailing only Detroit. It is clear that there is enormous

anger among rank-and-file educators who have been subjected to endless restructuring plans and attacks on their jobs and living standards aided and abetted by the CTU. The union collaborated with Democratic Mayor Frank Jackson and Ohio legislators in the 2012 passage of the so-called Cleveland Plan for Transforming School, which opened the way for the expansion of charter schools, lengthening the school year and assaulting teachers' jobs, work conditions and living standards.

The "Cleveland Plan" or House Bill 525 was to "remove legislative barriers to school reform," "grow the number of high-performing CMSD and charter schools" and "close and replace failing schools." The legislation included the setting up of the "Cleveland Transformation Alliance"—made up of various business foundations and charter school companies. The Alliance included CTU Local 279 President David Quolke on its executive board—to oversee so-called educational progress.

The union then threw its support behind a regressive plan to increase taxes by hundreds of dollars on Cleveland's largely impoverished homeowners—in a city where the value of the average home is \$58,000—to replace a portion of lost revenue due to corporate tax cuts, reduced federal and state aid and the funneling of money to for-profit charters.

This was followed by the 2013 contract signed by the CTU. According to the district's web site, "Major changes in the District's contract with the Cleveland Teachers Union, together with passage of HB 525 and Issue 107, paved the way in 2012-2013 for the district's most aggressive reform strategies in its history."

Under the current contract teachers are subjected to a multi-tier pay system based on their category:

“resident,” “professional” or “expert.” In lieu of regular pay raises based on seniority, levels of education and other factors, the district has paid out one-time bonuses or stipends if students report that their learning conditions have improved in an annual survey or educators receive advanced licenses.

According to the CTU, the district has reneged on the Cleveland Plan’s commitment to give teachers “credits toward increases in their base pay for meeting goals for their school.” The union says the district is also not paying higher base salary for “contractually-agreed items like teaching in hard-to-fill jobs or undesired schools; completing pre-approved courses and training that directly affect teaching; and taking steps to develop as a mentor and leader,” according to the *Plain Dealer*.

The Cleveland Plan called for teacher pay to be “based on performance,” making the district the only one in the state that does not pay according to years of service, education and training. The district only increases salaries when teachers earn strong ratings on their annual evaluations, which combine classroom observations by principals or other test-based evaluations, which supposedly rate how much students learned under each teacher in the course of a school year.

As in other school districts, teachers are being scapegoated for the impact of poverty—all 39,000 CMSD students qualify for free or subsidized meals because of chronic poverty—and decades of school closures.

The CTU and other unions offer no way forward for a struggle against these conditions. They are closely wedded to the Democratic Party and the entire political establishment and only look to be a “partner” in corporate-backed school “reform” and overseers in the impoverishment of their own members.

The 2013 contract called for “joint union and district committees to work out details of the [compensation] plan,” according to the *Plain Dealer*.

The dispute between school officials and CTU executives largely hinges on how to define and reward “performance.” Quolke claims that the CTU “would not have agreed to the Cleveland Plan without assurances that other factors, not just ratings, would be part of the new compensation system.”

Denying the obvious, Quolke said, “We did not agree to a merit pay system. They (the district) agreed to a

system that they have flat-out not built out. They have broken their promise to the community and they broke their promise to the legislature.”

Making it clear that the CTU would not fight the systematic starving of the public schools, Quolke added, “Money’s really not the issue at the table. It’s how we are living up to the promise of the Cleveland Plan.” The union president said he hoped the issues could be resolved quickly so the union could “begin working to pass the Cleveland school levy,” i.e., a renewal of the regressive tax increases.

The collusion of the CTU with the corporate political establishment underscores the need for Cleveland teachers to take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands through the election of rank-and-file committees to mobilize the working class against the bipartisan assault on public education.



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