

Union blocks teachers' strike as Clinton comes to Cleveland

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After 21 hours of secret negotiations, the Cleveland Teachers Union (CTU) reached a tentative agreement with the Cleveland Metropolitan School District at 5 a.m. Tuesday morning, shutting down a potential strike by 5,300 teachers Thursday night. The union has released no details on the substance of the deal or made any announcements when rank-and-file educators will vote on it.

Teachers who have been working without a contract since June 30 are opposed to the merit pay scheme imposed by the school district after the state legislature passed the so-called Cleveland Plan for Transforming Schools. While publicly criticizing “pay for performance”—which largely bases teachers’ salaries entirely on the results of standardized tests—the union backed the 2012 plan and signed a deal the year after handing sweeping concessions to the district.

The American Federation of Teachers and the CTU are engaged in a full-time campaign to promote Hillary Clinton’s presidential bid and are determined to prevent any strike that would highlight the anti-education policies pursued by the Obama administration over the last seven-and-a-half years. Clinton is expected to visit Cleveland on Labor Day where the unions will sing the praises of the preferred candidate of Wall Street and warmonger who would only escalate the assault on teachers and public education if she were elected in November.

District officials praised the deal, saying, “We are pleased to take a contract to the board that both sides see as fair,” said Chief Executive Officer Eric Gordon, “now we must work beyond the bargaining table to breathe life into a contract that has, at its heart, what’s best for kids.”

The union has announced that ratification votes will take place inside the schools rather than a mass

membership meeting. This only underscores the union’s fear of opposition from rank-and-file teachers who are fed up with the sweeping concessions the CTU agreed to in 2013.

“We worked hard to avoid any disruption to our students’ education,” said CTU President David Quolke, and “were able to bring back a contract that is good for kids and fair for educators—that our members will be proud to ratify.”

Bitter experience has shown that the working class has never achieved anything without mass struggle. The record of the teachers union has been nothing but collaboration with the school board and state legislature in rolling back conditions and living standards for Cleveland teachers.

Rank-and-file teachers expressed their skepticism on the union local’s Facebook page. “Prior to the settlement, one teacher, Alberta, expressed disgust with previous sellouts. “They keep giving our money, benefits and time back to the Administration while the Administration keeps stealing remember Barbara B. Bennett 10 million and the demise of PRE-K - 3rd grade and middle school destroying the Elementary’s!!!!”

The teacher here is referring here to Barbara B. Bennett who pled guilty to federal fraud charges last year in her capacity as CEO of Chicago Public Schools. Before moving to Chicago, Bennett had previously carried out wrecking operations in Cleveland and Detroit.

Another teacher, Cynthia, posted: “I have saved emails to and from the union president [about] many broken promises. At the time he was busy in Washington DC. I would like to see the union expense reports for the trips they take and other expenses they occur when traveling.”

Despite teachers voting overwhelmingly for strike action last May, the CTU refused to call a walkout when the contract expired on June 30. Instead, they waited until the day after the new school year began on August 15 for the executive board to vote to authorize a September 1 strike.

The union collaborated with Democratic Mayor Frank Jackson and Ohio legislators in the 2012 passage of the Cleveland Plan or House Bill 525. The aim of the bipartisan measure was to “remove legislative barriers to school reform,” expand charter schools and “close and replace failing schools.” A so-called Cleveland Transformation Alliance was set up to oversee the operations of the district. The alliance members include various business foundations, charter school companies and CTU Local 279 President David Quolke.

The union then threw its support behind a regressive plan to increase taxes on Cleveland’s largely impoverished homeowners to replace lost revenue due to decades of corporate tax cuts, reduced federal and state aid and the funneling of money to for-profit charters. Cleveland is the second poorest big city in America behind Detroit.

Teachers are now subjected to a multi-tier pay system based on their category: “resident,” “professional” or “expert.” The Cleveland Plan makes 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 based largely on standardized tests.

As in other school districts, teachers are being scapegoated for the impact of poverty. All 39,000 students in the district qualify for free or subsidized meals because of chronic poverty, and decades of deindustrialization, and the destruction of social programs such as welfare.

The union and management are eager to get the contract out of the way so they jointly push for a renewal of the regressive school taxes.

The conspiracy 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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