

Cleveland teacher denounces sellout contract

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Last month, Cleveland teachers voted 1,832 to 1,730 to reject the three-year contract that was fully backed by the Cleveland Teachers Union (CTU) and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the corporate-controlled media and political establishment. The CTU agreed to the federally mediated deal on August 30, just days before the deadline for a strike, which had been overwhelmingly authorized by the district's 4,300 teachers and support staff.

Voting took place over the next month. The defeat of the contract was announced on September 22. Rank-and-file teachers opposed to the deal circulated fliers encouraging their colleagues to vote down the sellout deal. A widely publicized leaflet, headlined "You Deserve Better," issued by Errol Savage, a union building representative from Newton D. Baker elementary school, and math teacher Chris Malinoski, denounced the "abusive amount of testing" and "vindictive and overbearing administrators." These sentiments resonate not only among teachers in Cleveland but educators throughout the United States.

The district unsuccessfully attempted to victimize Savage and remove him from his teaching position after he issued the leaflet. Officials cynically claimed the "emergency removal" and the attempt to place him in what educators call the "teacher jail" was for his own protection, claiming he was "in clear and imminent danger." Savage exposed this bogus claim and district officials were forced to back down.

The rejection of the contract occurred on the heels of Hillary Clinton's visit to Cleveland, which was hosted by the AFT and the AFL-CIO. After two terms of Obama in the White House, more and more workers are drawing the conclusion that the election of a Democrat for president will not resolve the burning questions of social inequality or stop the profit-driven assault on public education.

The contract only gave the teachers a 2 percent pay raise for the 2016-2017 school year while any additional increase would be negotiated after the \$60 million tax levy renewal is voted on in November. The CTU is

pushing this regressive tax on working class homeowners—in one of the poorest cities in America—even as both Democrats and Republicans shower corporate kingpins like casino and professional sports billionaire Dan Gilbert with tax cuts and other subsidies.

The CTU also offered a \$4,000 bonus to less than 10 percent of the teachers in order to divide the workforce and use the economic desperation of low-paid teachers to coerce them into signing away their futures.

The value added measure (VAM) or "pay for performance" scheme contained in the deal is a mockery, and leaves a lack of supplies—such as computers for the "computer based" standardized tests—and the grinding poverty that has riddled this once thriving and now rustbelt city—out of the equation.

Based on responses to the contract on the CTU Facebook page, teachers are not as concerned with their pay increases as they are with the excessive level of what they term, "abusive" testing, unequal resources throughout the district, and the loss of art and music.

The union collaborated with Democratic Mayor Frank Jackson and Ohio legislators in the 2012 passage of the so-called 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." The Cleveland Transformation Alliance, set up to oversee the operations of the district, includes various business foundations, charter school companies and CTU Local 279 President David Quolke.

Mike, a veteran educator, spoke to the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* about the struggle in Cleveland. "The problem is the exorbitant taxes we pay. It doesn't trickle into the classroom. Administrative salaries have gone up."

According to a 2012 article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, referring to salaries five years ago, in 2011, "... of 5,127 salaried employees from last school year, 36—all administrators—had salaries over \$100,000. Most of the 63 people in the \$90,000 to \$99,999 range were principals." At that time five new positions were also created to implement the punitive testing machine with such

important sounding titles as “Action Team Coach” with a top salary of \$102,000, and “Flexible Content Specialist” with a top salary of \$94,000.

Mike also pointed out, “There are so many antiquated schools. The state of Ohio just dropped a \$10 million grant for facilities. The Transformation Alliance will get sweetheart deals on these facilities. They will refurbish old facilities on the waterfront. A lot of resources are being poured into the near west side, and University Circle where the Cleveland Clinic and Case Western University are located.

“Cleveland is a poor city of about 400,000 and very racially segregated. The West Side is mostly white, the majority in the city are African American, with some Puerto Rican and some Arabic.

“They are trying to have a handful of 10-20 flagship public schools, and the rest charter. In New Orleans it took Katrina to facilitate what they are doing in Cleveland with HB525. Governor Kasich tried to get rid of public unions—he may have, if he had not included the police and firemen. So that part of the bill was shot down. It just affects school districts under mayoral control. At the time Cleveland was the only school district under mayoral control. It also basically got rid of our seniority. This bill was sponsored by Nina Turner, a Democrat [State Senator, 25th District, 2008-2014]. Nina Turner was a big advocate of Bernie Sanders.”

As Cleveland teachers were rejecting high stakes testing, merit pay and the charterization of public schools, Ohio’s largest charter school, Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT), lied about its enrollment numbers, and falsely claimed 9,000 more students than were actually enrolled in order to get \$64 million in additional state money. That’s roughly equivalent to the 15-mil tax levy being extorted from Cleveland’s mostly impoverished residents with the backing of the unions.

ECOT students are only required to log in once for an hour per day during the week but the cyberschool was unable to even show this minimal participation. The state did not require ECOT to provide any evidence of student work or proof of student learning but only that someone at the student’s IP address had logged on with the student’s ID.

Referring to this Mike said, “HB525 facilitates the growth of charter schools like ECOT. This levy is blackmail. The Cleveland Teachers Union is behind this levy because there will be a lot of layoffs and teachers would not be called back. Many people are pulling their kids out of the district because of the broken promises.

We passed an earlier levy and we see nothing. We want our kids to have full time music and art teachers. These are necessary for a child’s education, but the district has a data-based brand of education that doesn’t look at children as individuals. We are data mining and shuffling papers, not educating children.

“Ohio has always had mandatory testing. However, Cleveland takes it a step further. One of the things we asked for was an end to this abusive testing. There is nothing quantifiable in the contract wording to show there will be a reduction.

“We easily test 15 days out of a 180-day calendar—a good 7-8 percent of our year is standardized testing. You also have to test the entire class. If the computer lab holds 15 students and you have 30 students, then you have to give 15 “busy work” so you can watch the 15 taking the test. Then it takes twice the amount of time.

“Our union execs are very salty right now. They say they put together a good agreement because they were handcuffed by HB525. However, there are some things that could have happened despite it. We want our paraprofessionals to make a living wage, they make only in the \$20,000 range. The secretaries, janitors, etc. need to make more. I say we take care of all of the workers, not just administration.

“Here we are trying to get a 15 mil levy, but it would take a fraction of the money spent on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to stop the cycle of poverty in a city like Cleveland. Then we could get test scores up.

“As a teacher, when I see either Clinton or Trump taking over, I see fast tracking to private schools. I don’t want to see WWII either. I don’t think either of them is going to be for the working class. Eli Broad is a big donor to Hillary Clinton and she and (AFT President) Randi Weingarten are close friends. Where does that leave us?

“Back in the 70s and 80s we were a big industrial hub, but there are not that many jobs anymore. The biggest employer in the city is the Cleveland Clinic. We have 400,000 people and the district says they want to send the most promising 40,000 to get a college degree. But what are they going to come back to? There’s nothing here.”



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