

# Burlington, Vermont teachers strike continues as officials refuse to budge on concession demands

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Teachers in Burlington, Vermont, are set to continue their strike Monday, walking picket lines at all nine city schools. The 400 teachers went out on strike Thursday after nine-hour negotiations Wednesday between a mediator, the city's Democratic mayor and the Burlington Education Association (BEA) broke down.

This is the first strike by teachers since 1978 in the state's largest school district, which serves 4,000 students. Hundreds of teachers and their supporters rallied Sunday afternoon outside Burlington City Hall.

BEA President Fran Brock, a Burlington High School history teacher, said the union had not heard from the Burlington School Board on Friday. "There are conversations going on, Brock told the *Burlington Free Press*, but she said those talks were happening with mediator Ira Lobel.

Burlington School District Spokesman Erik Wells wrote in news release: "To meet for the sake of meeting, without the likelihood of success, would be counterproductive as it falsely raises community expectations."

While School Board Chairman Mark Porter claimed on Wednesday the district was offering an eight percent raise over three years, Brock disputed this. Because of Vermont's Act 85, all contracts will have to be renegotiated in two years, making the district's third-year offer of 2.75 percent moot.

For the second year in a row, the Burlington School Board unilaterally imposed a contract on teachers when their previous contract expired August 31. The board's current offer of a paltry 2.4 percent wage increase in the first year and 2.6 percent in the second would keep teachers in the bottom third of country earners.

In addition, teachers would be subject to sharply

higher out-of-pocket health care costs, including a \$1,200 family deductible. Teachers also strongly oppose the board's insistence that teachers continue to spend some of their time supervising students during recess and lunchtime, time teachers say is better spent preparing lesson plans, meeting with students and evaluating their progress. The BEA is calling on the district to hire additional adult staff to take over these functions.

More than 100 Burlington educators have resigned or been forcibly retired over the last 27 months. In particular, teachers are outraged over the district's dumping of 27 students with a variety of social and behavioral needs in a cafeteria with limited supervision along with 300 high school students enrolled in the standard curriculum. The district aims to save \$130,000 a year through this ill-advised proposal.

Act 85, negotiated between the Vermont state legislature and Republican Governor Phil Scott, mandates a statewide claw-back of \$8.5 million from school districts around the state this year and another \$4.5 million in fiscal year 2019. The state is attempting to place the burden of an anticipated change in the cost of school employee health plans January 1 on the backs of teachers, other school workers, and students.

These savage cutbacks follow tens of millions in cuts to Vermont school spending by the state's previous governor, Democrat Peter Shumlin. Burlington authorities are taking their cue from the "profit-driven" school reform policies advanced by Democrats and Republicans alike over the last quarter century.

Shumlin and Vermont Democrats built on the Obama administration's Race To The Top (RTTT) program, which followed George W. Bush's No Children Left

Behind, tying federal school funding even more closely to test-based performance standards. The Democrats' tactical difference has been to work more closely with the Vermont Education Association and other unions to implement cuts to public education.

Senator Bernie Sanders, the mayor of Burlington between 1981 and 1989, has issued no public statements on the strike. Sanders, who is trying to boost illusions in the Democratic Party, is no doubt concerned with the growing opposition of teachers to the bipartisan assault on public education and hopes the BEA can quickly wrap up the strike.

The attack by both big-business parties on teachers underscores the treachery of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, BEA's parent union, which are politically aligned with the Democratic Party. The unions have joined with state authorities in plans to dismantle of public education, expand charter schools, and impose contracts attacking teachers' wages and working conditions.

Earlier this year, Governor Scott attempted to implement statewide health care negotiations for state workers, but his effort failed in the state legislature. Unions representing Vermont school employees, however, last month agreed to join state officials and school district leaders in a commission to study whether Vermont school employee health benefits should be negotiated statewide, rather than district-by-district. The outcome of such negotiations can only mean further cuts for school workers.

As of September 6, there were 59 settled school district contracts in Vermont, out of 142 bargaining groups, including support staff. Most school contracts in the state expired this summer. The South Burlington School Board voted August 29 to impose a contract on district teachers. While teachers rejected the imposed contract, the union has not called a strike.

Typical of the unions' role in collaborating with school authorities to hold back the struggle of teachers, South Burlington Education Association spokesman Noah Everitt told the *Free Press*, "We believe there is still an opportunity for us to come together." Milton and Chittenden Supervisory Union bargaining units also have unsettled contract negotiations, while teachers remain on the job.

The battle to defend and improve public education

can only be carried out through a political counteroffensive by teachers and school workers against the bipartisan attack on education. The Democrats cannot be pushed to the left, as Sanders maintains.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers in Vermont to organize independent strike committees, controlled by rank-and-file educators, to carry out this fight. Subscribe to the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* today to follow the struggle of teachers nationwide and discuss this strategy.



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