

Jersey City teachers poised to strike

Mark Ferretti
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Negotiations between the union for Jersey City public school teachers and the board of education are continuing to drag on following a vote by teachers in late February to strike if they cannot reach a contract settlement. The contract for the city's approximately 4,000 teachers expired in August 2017, and they have been working without a contract ever since.

Teachers say that the cost of health benefits has consumed an ever-larger part of their paychecks, and some worry that they may no longer be able to afford to live in Jersey City. At a special meeting in January, Mike Greco, a special education teacher, told the school board, "I'm making less than I was five years ago."

Under terms of a 2011 state law called Chapter 78, teachers are seeking to reduce the amount of money they are required to contribute toward health benefits. The school board is resisting their demand.

Sudhan Thomas, president of the Jersey City Board of Education (JCBOE), was elected with JCEA's (Jersey City Education Association) backing on the grounds that he was supposedly pro-worker. However, in an interview with the *Jersey Journal*, Thomas emphasized "the realities of the 2017–18 budget" and its "central role in everything."

"We are currently spending close to \$100 million annually on health care costs and are working on a robust, comprehensive, affordable health care plan that will benefit the 4,000 employees of the JCBOE and importantly cut our health insurance operating costs significantly," Thomas continued. His comments signal an intention to place still more of the burden of health care costs on teachers' shoulders.

Chapter 78 established that teachers would pay a percentage of their health insurance costs that would increase during an initial four-year period. Teacher contributions range from 3 percent to 35 percent of their salaries. The end of the initial four-year period in Jersey City prompted the teachers to seek relief from

mounting costs.

One of the law's backers, Republican State Senator Declan J. O'Scanlon Jr., has exhorted the JCBOE not to cave in to the teachers. "Everyone should very publicly be saying, we are not negotiating health benefits, not one iota, not one inch," he said in an interview with the *Jersey Journal*. "Once that's gone, it doesn't come back, and if you have health benefit costs that go up disproportionately going forward, that all falls on the taxpayers."

Under Chapter 78, the cost of teachers' health benefits has gone up enormously. Since the school year that began in fall 2010, teachers' contributions have risen an incredible 475 percent from \$4.2 million to \$19.9 million. This increase results from the city's efforts to, in Thomas's words, "cut our health insurance operating costs significantly." Such cost-cutting will only continue.

Ron Greco, president of JCEA, did not respond to a request for comment by the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter*. In February Greco issued a statement accusing the JCBOE of procrastination and delay. In the statement, Greco said, "Our educators want to take the JCBOE at their word that they want to settle a fair contract at the table. We want nothing more than to get back to work under a contract that respects the expertise of our members and the need for affordable health care." The union and the board continue to meet in negotiations.

Teachers have protested and held rallies outside of their schools in the morning, before classes. In an attempt to curb free speech and intimidate the workers, police gave \$54 tickets to several drivers who honked their horns in solidarity. As justification, they cited residents' supposed complaints about the noise. A teacher was among those ticketed. Even a police officer reportedly was scolded by his superiors for honking as he drove past a protest.

“If someone drives by the teachers and just honks their horn in support and moves on, then of course the city doesn’t issue tickets,” said Kimberly Wallace-Scalcione, a spokesperson for Jersey City. But the city’s actions have belied its words. Officials placed electronic signs reading, “Please do not honk,” near two schools. Such actions flagrantly disregard court rulings in states such as Michigan and Washington that honking can be considered protected free speech.

The last time Jersey City’s teachers struck was in 1998. By mid-morning on the first day of the strike, the district was forced to close high schools when students became unruly. After four days, about 75 percent of elementary students were no longer attending school. Teachers returned to work after five days under a court order.

The Jersey City teachers’ struggle occurs in the context of increasing anger and frustration among teachers in the United States and abroad. In a dramatic move, more than 30,000 teachers and state workers in West Virginia struck over wages and health benefits in opposition to their unions. In Illinois, graduate student workers began a strike on February 26 over pay increases and tuition waivers. Oklahoma teachers are on the verge of a strike, and teachers in Kentucky are angry at the underfunding of their pensions. University lecturers in the United Kingdom have protested cuts to their pensions, and lecturers in Kenya have shut down the public university system there.

The entire policy of the JCEA is to subordinate the struggle of teachers to maneuvers with right-wing Democratic Party politicians. Indeed, the JCEA helped to install a school board president who is attempting to extract concessions from the teachers.

As the recent teacher rebellion in West Virginia demonstrated, to wage a serious struggle workers must act independently and in opposition to the unions and the Democrats. The Socialist Equality Party and the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* took up the fight for teachers to form rank-and-file committees that would direct a struggle for basic health care rights and better wages by expanding their strike to other workers in the state, particularly striking Frontier Communications workers, and to youth and students.

Ultimately, the West Virginia Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia were able to engineer a return to work under

terms of a rotten agreement that failed to address any of these issues. The agreement proposes to pay for the raises of the teachers by slashing funding to Medicaid.

Jersey City teachers must study the development of the teachers’ strike in West Virginia closely.

Only by a complete break with the trade unions and the Democratic Party in coordinated action with other public- and private-sector workers in New Jersey can Jersey City teachers defend their rights.



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