

Union cuts deal to end Jersey City strike as teacher protests spread

Jerry White
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The Jersey City Education Association (JCEA) announced late Sunday night that it had reached a deal with the school district to end the strike by 4,000 teachers and school employees in the US state of New Jersey's second largest school system. The union rushed to get the agreement as rank-and-file teachers prepared to defy a Hudson County judge's back-to-work order, which could have quickly escalated into a broader confrontation with the state's Democratic and Republican politicians.

With typical contempt for rank-and-file teachers, the JCEA issued a perfunctory statement on its Facebook page, announcing, "As of the time of posting, details of the settlement had not been released, but JCEA had long maintained that relief from the onerous health care contributions imposed by Ch. 78, but negotiable under state law, was a fundamental issue in the negotiations." The union declared that schools would reopen as scheduled Monday morning without saying a word about strikers voting on the deal, let alone being forced to return to work without even seeing its details.

"I think we reached a fair and equitable agreement with the district," JCEA President Ron Greco told the *Jersey Journal*, adding that teachers would vote to ratify the agreement sometime "before April's school board meeting."

Any agreement reached behind the backs of rank-and-file teachers to end the strike without a vote can be nothing but a sellout that betrays the fight to end soaring health care costs that erode teachers' paychecks in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the nation. Jersey City teachers and school employees should reject this with the contempt it deserves and elect rank-and-file committees to mobilize the broadest support for a genuine fight to defend the right to a living wage, affordable health care and high-

quality education.

After being kept on the job for eight months without a new contract and suffering years of soaring health costs under the bipartisan bill, known as Chapter 78, signed by Republican Governor Chris Christie in 2011, teachers in Jersey City forced the JCEA to call a strike last Friday. The bill forces public employees to pay up to 35 percent of their medical insurance premiums, further increases out-of-pocket costs if wages go up, and imposes substandard pensions on future hires.

The Jersey City strike was the latest in a wave of strikes, threatened walkouts and protests by educators and school employees in the aftermath of the nine-day strike by 33,000 educators and school employees in West Virginia. This movement prompted a worried comment from the *Wall Street Journal*, which said, "The unrest is part of a broader fight unfolding around the country. Teachers from Kentucky, West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona have staged strikes and demonstrations, and they have threatened walkouts over new proposals to install limits on pensions, wage increases and benefits."

The *Journal* pointed to a reduction in state spending on public education since the 2008 financial crash, noting, "States spent 2% less on K-12 education in 2017 than they did in 2008, according to data from the National Association of Budget Officers adjusted for inflation and population growth."

The West Virginia strike was betrayed by the unions, which abandoned the strikers' main demand to fully fund the public employee medical insurance agency and end soaring health care costs. To add insult to injury, the meager five percent raise agreed to by the state's billionaire governor, Jim Justice, will be funded by cuts in other essential services.

"There's nothing between the Democrats and

Republicans now. It's the same stuff, different name," Nicole, a West Virginia educator, told the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*. "I fear they are going to privatize the PEIA (Public Employees Insurance Agency) now.

"We decided to wildcat when the union leaders told us to go back to work. I said, 'Hell no, I'm not going back.' I thought others would trust the union. When the people said, 'We're going to stay out,' it was so exciting to see that map of school closures light up. I didn't expect it, but our strike has made other people say, 'We've had enough.' Workers all over are saying, 'The time is now. If they can do it, we can too.'"

The revolt by the West Virginia teachers, which temporarily broke free from the stranglehold of the unions, has encouraged similar struggles by educators in Kentucky, Arizona, Oklahoma and other states. In the US territory of Puerto Rico, teachers are launching a one-day strike today over efforts by the island's authorities, working closely with Trump's education secretary Betsy DeVos, to exploit the aftermath of Hurricane Maria to vastly expand charter schools and other for-profit schemes.

Teachers are currently on strike in the Pittsburgh suburb of South Butler. In the aftermath of the strike by graduate students and teaching assistants at the University of Illinois, non-tenured faculty at Loyola University in Chicago have threatened to strike on April 4.

This upsurge is part of an international growth of the class struggle, and in particular growing battles against austerity by educators around the world, including 40,000 university lecturers in the United Kingdom who rebelled against a sellout agreement last week, and university lecturers in Kenya and Niger who have defied injunctions and are striking over pay and conditions.

On March 14, 15,000 striking primary school teachers in the Dutch provinces of Utrecht, Noord-Holland and Flevoland marched in Amsterdam to demand higher wages and improved working conditions. On the same day, 40,000 educators in the Central European country of Slovenia conducted a one-day strike, and thousands marched in the capital city of Ljubljana, carrying banners, including one that read, "Teachers—big heart, small salary."

While the Obama administration bailed out the Wall Street bankers and speculators that crashed the

economy in 2008, there was no government bailout for the states, municipalities and school districts that were devastated by the loss of tax revenue, collapsing home prices and the growth of unemployment.

The resulting financial crisis was used to eliminate the jobs of more than 300,000 teachers and school employees, shift the costs of health care onto the backs of educators and other public employees and raid the constitutionally protected pensions of public sector workers. At the same time, the Democratic president provided limited federal aid to school districts that used high stakes tests to scapegoat and fire teachers and sharply expand for-profit charter businesses.

The assault on education is being escalated under the Trump administration, which is slashing billions from federal spending and promoting school vouchers and other attacks on public education.

In West Virginia, the teacher unions falsely presented state Democrats as champions of the teachers and public education, even though the Democrats had run the state for most of the last 100 years. In New Jersey, the unions have condemned former Republican governor Chris Christie for Chapter 78, but the measure was backed by leading Democrats.

This includes Democratic State Senate President Steve Sweeney, a general vice president of the ironworkers union, and House Speaker Sheila Oliver, who now serves as the state's lieutenant governor under Democrat Governor Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs executive. Jersey City's mayor, Steven Fulop, is a rising star in the state Democratic Party who has overseen the gentrification of the largely impoverished city.

"I've been on conference calls with teachers around the country," Nicole, the West Virginia teacher said. "There's Oklahoma and Arizona, but there's even rumblings in Louisiana and a Los Angeles schools district. My hope is that the people can look past the two-party system and find power in themselves. There is nothing that can be done by those in power if we stay steadfast in what we want."



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