

NEA pushes through sellout a month after shutdown of Jersey City teachers' strike

Steve Light
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Teachers in Jersey City, New Jersey, voted April 19 to approve a deal by the Jersey City Education Association (JCEA), which was used to shut down the one-day March 16 strike by 4,000 teachers and school employees. The delay of a month was likely necessary to bully teachers and sell the deal, which did not meet their main demand to end soaring out-of-pocket medical costs under New Jersey's health care plan known as Chapter 78.

Rank-and-file teachers launched the strike only two weeks after West Virginia teachers walked out, also over the health care issue. The unions were determined to shut down the strike in a major urban area in order to block the growing momentum of teacher struggles, which spread from West Virginia to Oklahoma and now Arizona and Colorado. In late February, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers also blocked the first school strike in that city in 40 years, and then delayed a ratification vote for more than a month.

In reality, the chief factor for the spread of strikes in states like West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona is precisely the weakness of the grip of the unions whose main function is to stifle and suppress the resistance of teachers and other workers while working with both parties to impose austerity.

Of the 75 percent of the Jersey City teachers who voted, 81 percent voted in favor. Both the union and the school board sought to blackmail teachers to accept the deal with threats of impending budget cuts and the possible layoff of over 300 teachers. The 19 percent opposition, plus 25 percent abstention, indicated deep dissatisfaction.

The passage of Chapter 78 in 2011 was part of a bipartisan assault on public employees' living standards by the Democratic-controlled state legislature and Governor Chris Christie, a Republican. The New

Jersey Education Association (NJEA) is allied with the state Democrats, which have attacked teachers and public employees just as viciously as the Republicans, and backed current Democratic governor, Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs banker.

"In addition to increases in pension contributions," the teacher union acknowledged, "Chapter 78 also mandated that employees pay a percentage of their health insurance premium. Depending on plan choices, level of coverage, and salary, the employee contribution ranges from 3% of the premium to 35% of the premium. When an employee's salary increases, the contribution may jump to another level of premium sharing, resulting in the pay raise being reduced, negated, or, even worse, decreased," according to the union's web site.

Subsequent premium increases further reduced public employees' take-home pay. Many teachers have had to increase credit card debt in order to meet payments.

The agreement between the union and board of education gives no more than a temporary abeyance of Chapter 78 cost increases, perhaps only partially in many cases. The teachers, who had wages frozen for the last eight months, will receive a 3.5 percent increase, retroactive to September, and a 2.75 percent increase for the 2018-2019 school year. In addition, the teachers will receive a check in December as a rebate to "freeze" the Chapter 78 costs for this year.

Teachers "individually insured would receive a stipend for 1.75 percent of their salary, two-adult and parent-child plans would receive a 2 percent stipend, and those with family plans would receive a 2.25 percent stipend," according to *The Jersey Journal*. Predictably, JCEA President Ron Greco told the *Jersey Journal* the deal was "a fair and equitable agreement with the district."

The insulting pay raises will do little for teachers who live in the New York metropolitan area, one of the most expensive regions in the world. Moreover, like the deals the unions reached in West Virginia and Oklahoma, the raises will be paid for through regressive taxes, in this case a local tax levy of two percent, that will hit working-class residents the hardest.

While the unions and the media have largely blamed the wave of teacher strikes on right-wing Republicans in “Red States,” the actions of the Jersey City mayor and Democratic-controlled school board in Jersey City revealed that anti-working-class character of the Democrats. Mayor Steven Fulop (also a Goldman Sachs alumnus) obtained a court injunction on the same day of the teachers’ strike.

A 12-year teacher told the WSWWS the impetus for the strike came from rank-and-file teachers in the schools and not the union leadership. “Members started the morning walks at the schools. It was not directed by the union. The strike was worth it. There has been an attack on public education for years. We need more walkouts and job actions. People across the country are fed up. The wealthy get a huge tax break while they say the pot of money dries up. The struggles will keep spreading especially in ‘right-to-work’ states.”

He also voiced the distrust of the unions common to many Jersey City teachers. “You cannot depend on the politicians or your own leaders. It is the grassroots who will start to walk out. We live in an oligarchy.”

A performing arts teacher at Snyder High School who said she had reluctantly voted for the deal told the WSWWS, “We still have to struggle. We are not getting our way on Chapter 78. It is a legislative fight, but I agree that the state and federal governments are cutting and a national link-up of teachers is a good idea. The ranks started the strike.”

Dori, teaching film making for 11 years at Snyder, said, “I think the problem is more over health care for a lot of us. We need relief from the state level. We are seeing this across the United States. We continue to make less even if they give us a pay raise. My mother and grandmother were teachers. They did not make a lot of money, but they had benefits like health care. The state needs to be creative, like maybe have a loan forgiveness program. Otherwise, they are not going to retain good teachers.”

Another teacher told the WSWWS, “The agreement is not what we asked for. But this is an uphill journey. I expect the struggle to continue because the agreement is only for two years. If it had been for longer, we might have had to continue to strike. It does include the option to go back and open it. Chapter 78 relief was the main issue. Veteran teachers pay a lot and every year there has been a rise in health costs. It is time for teachers to rise up. The rich keep getting richer and the poor poorer. The needs of students are not considered.”

A teaching assistant at Snyder High School complained, “As a substitute I do not have permanent status. A whole lot needs to be done in the schools. Teachers go above and beyond. I have no benefits and if there is no school, I do not get paid. I have no sick days.”

A maintenance worker said he supported the teachers. “It is the little man who is not making money. So how can the rich keep making money? We definitely have to unite.”

More than a fifth of Jersey City’s 250,000 residents are living below the official poverty level. At the same time the city, located just five miles across the Hudson River from New York City, is home to one of the largest financial centers in the US outside of New York City—Exchange Place, also known as “Wall Street West.”



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