

Teachers union celebrates alliance with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo

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The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), New York City affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), is boasting of its alliance with Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, who just signed legislation designed to assist the UFT and other public employee unions in recruiting new members even if the US Supreme Court rules against the unions in the *Janus v. AFSCME* case. *Janus* is a Republican-backed lawsuit that, if successful, could end the collection of “agency fees” from workers covered by collective bargaining who do not join unions.

The current UFT-Cuomo alliance is a sharp warning to teachers across the US who have embarked on powerful rank-and-file struggles to defend public education and fight against the poverty-level wages and appalling conditions facing both educators and their students. It is yet another demonstration of the role of the unions as adjuncts of the capitalist state and eager participants in the maintenance of “labor peace.”

As AFT President Randi Weingarten put it, in a warning directed to the high court justices last month, the weakening of the unions would “lead to more activism and political action,” as in West Virginia. Conversely, of course, the strengthening of the unions would mean the opposite result—more effectively restraining teachers as public education is attacked via budget cuts.

This is clearly the basis of the love fest between Cuomo and the UFT. A report in the *NY Teacher*, online publication of the UFT, notes that Cuomo signed the bill “before a packed house” at UFT headquarters in Manhattan. The law, “hammered out as part of this year’s state budget cuts” in Albany in late March, contains two major provisions.

First, the unions will now be permitted to withhold certain services from nonmembers who are otherwise covered by the collective bargaining contract. These include legal representation in work-related proceedings,

life and auto insurance, test preparation for civil service exams and other benefits.

At the same time, under the new law, the state and other public agencies and jurisdictions will be required to notify the union about any new-hires within 30 days and turn over their names and contact information. The union will then have 30 days during which it is permitted, within working hours, to recruit these new employees.

The new legislation has absolutely nothing to do with defending rank-and-file teachers and their students. It has everything to do with the defense of the union apparatus and the salaries and privileges of the officials whose job is to regulate the system in the interests of the capitalist system as a whole.

One would never guess from reading the *NY Teacher* that Cuomo, the two-term governor of New York, has a record of vicious attacks on teachers and other sections of the working class. Only a few years ago, for instance, the *New York Daily News* reported that “a passionate Gov. Cuomo” told the *News* editorial board that he held the teachers responsible for the conditions facing hundreds of thousands of New York City students in failing schools. He explained how he had laid into a teacher who said he represented his students. “No, you don’t,” Cuomo was quoted as saying back in 2015. “You represent the teachers, teacher salaries, teacher pensions, teacher tenure, teacher vacation rights... Don’t say you represent the students.”

The governor’s tirade, while addressed partly toward the union officials, was in fact aimed directly at the teachers. It was designed to drive a wedge between teachers and working class parents, and to divert attention from the fact that conditions in the schools have been severely impacted by many years of federal, state and city austerity, and above all by the conditions facing working class families outside the schools themselves, especially since the financial crash of 2008.

Cuomo became notorious for his right-wing attacks on teacher tenure, his demands for the accelerated firing of “ineffective teachers,” and his support for charter schools to further undermine the public school system. Back in 2014, he contemptuously dismissed newly elected New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio’s plea for a pathetically small tax increase on the wealthy to fund universal pre-kindergarten. The governor addressed a charter school rally in the state capital that was organized at his instruction and funded by hedge fund billionaires who were using the cause of charters to advance their agenda to privatize education and divide the working class.

Cuomo has not changed his positions. He remains a cynical political operative, a faithful servant of Wall Street. And the issues that divided him from his currently enthusiastic backers in the trade union apparatus were never ones of principle.

The incumbent governor is seeking to refurbish his “friend of labor” image in advance of his effort to secure a third term this fall. First, he faces Cynthia Nixon, the actress who is running on a platform of “left” criticisms of Cuomo.

More fundamentally, Cuomo speaks for a section of the ruling elite that sees the importance of strengthening the union apparatus. The Republicans seek to undermine the unions, if not dispensing with them entirely, in the interests of unrestrained attacks on the working class. Democrats like Cuomo, with an eye to struggles of teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and elsewhere, are seeking to use the services of the AFT and NEA to suppress strikes and independent political struggle.

The relationship between the Democrats and the unions has gone far beyond the at times uneasy alliance of decades past. There is not an ounce of principled difference between the unions and the Democrats at present. The unions are a crucial part of this capitalist party today. As Cuomo put it, quite revealingly, at the UFT headquarters: Republicans are hostile to the unions because “it is the union movement that drives the Democratic Party.”

As far as the AFT is concerned, it is more than willing to let bygones be bygones with the governor. It is worried that its position is threatened on one side by the Republican right wing, but on the other, and more dangerously for the system as a whole, by the insurgent teachers, who are searching for a means of effective struggle against decades of vicious attacks on jobs, working conditions, living standards and public services.

What the UFT is celebrating is a repaired relationship with Cuomo in which the union promises, in effect, to make sure that the teachers in New York don’t get it into their heads to follow the example being set by their colleagues around the US.

The UFT’s praise for Cuomo is not a drastic change in position. The teachers’ unions, despite occasional clashes with Cuomo and with the Obama administration and its education secretary Arne Duncan, have demonstrated time and again that they are prepared to do business with big business on such “reforms” as merit pay, charter school expansion and other attacks on teachers and public schools. In 2012, for instance, the New York State AFT affiliate backed Cuomo’s efforts to use “teacher evaluations” to scapegoat supposedly ineffective teachers for the consequences of the decaying profit system.

The teacher unions would have little to fear from the forthcoming *Janus* decision if they were fighting organizations of the working class. They are not workers’ organizations, however. They rely completely on the state and on the corporate establishment, in which they function as junior partners. Randi Weingarten of the AFT sits on the Democratic National Committee. The AFT and the rest of the AFL-CIO have become adjuncts of the state, dedicated above all to defending the capitalist status quo.

If they pretend to support teachers in current struggles, it is only in order to betray them more effectively, as the experiences in Oklahoma and West Virginia have already shown. It is necessary for rank-and-file teachers to draw the lessons of these experiences, to break with the corporatist unions and build independent committees that turn to other sections of the working class to wage a truly effective struggle, on that raises the urgent need for a socialist program.



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