New York City teachers union attempts to rush through sellout contract

Guillaume Garnier, Steve Light
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Anger is brewing among New York City teachers after last week's announcement of a tentative contract agreement between the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the city's Department of Education. The deal provides small wage increases that fail to keep up with inflation, contains new healthcare givebacks and does nothing to secure decent conditions among the approximately 1.6 million public school children in the largest school district in America.

"I will vote no on the contract," a senior teacher told the World Socialist Web Site. We have the 150 extra minutes each week, split on Mondays and Tuesdays, that was added [to our school day] in 2014. It is not a raise if I have to work for it. On top of that the money does not even keep up with inflation."

He added, "It is not respectful of what teachers do. I don't need to be mandated to stay later and call parents. The popular term we use is 'teacher detention.' The UFT says there is no giveback but there is plenty giveback."

The UFT called an emergency delegate assembly last Friday, months before the negotiations were scheduled to finish, and sent the proposed contract to teachers for approval. The rush to ratification is unquestionably motivated by the concern that a social explosion among educators is mounting in New York City in the aftermath of strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado and Washington state.

With the 2018 midterm elections approaching, the leading union executives, including UFT President Michael Mulgrew and Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, are desperately seeking to forestall a conflict that could disrupt the Democratic Party's posturing as a progressive and pro-worker organization.

The UFT executives also want to push through a contract quickly because of the tense situation in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest American school district. The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) has forced educators to work without a contract for 14 months and has ignored the 98 percent vote to authorize a strike, which teachers cast last September. Mediation has failed to come to any resolution and teachers are determined to fight for improved wages, school funding and classroom conditions.

The UFT is not just trying to force another concessionary contract down the throats of teachers. Under conditions of a desperate social crisis—including a nearly 10 percent student homeless rate in New York City—the deal, if pushed through, would severely degrade an already underfunded and understaffed public-school system. Classrooms will be hit with more cutbacks, paraprofessionals will continue to be paid poverty wages, and the tiered pension system will be maintained. The insulting raises of 2 percent, 2.5 percent, and 3 percent over the life of the contract (February 2019 to September 2022) translate, in fact, to a pay cut under conditions of rising inflation in one of the world's most expensive cities. This will not only force teachers deeper into poverty, but inadequate wages will continue to fuel the exodus of young people from the teaching profession and drive class sizes even higher.

The contract also attacks teachers' access to healthcare. In June the Municipal Labor Committee (MLC: an umbrella group of more than 100 public sector unions in New York) and the City agreed to $1.1 billion in healthcare cuts by 2021, an agreement upon which teachers did not get to vote. As a result, teachers are in effect paying for their own wage increases. This is on top of the $3.4 billion robbed from teachers' and other public workers' healthcare funds since a 2014 agreement between the MLC and the supposedly "progressive" Democratic Party administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio.

In June, the UFT negotiated a two-and-a-half month contract extension for teachers in exchange for paid parental leave benefits (from a fund which the union will be paid to manage). The funding of the benefit was accomplished through deferred wage hikes and pension saving, e.g. by the teachers themselves. Nonetheless, it was hailed as a great union "victory" by the International Socialist Organization and other pseudo-left groups whose members are increasingly manning positions in teacher unions across the

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According to another teacher speaking to the WSWS, the contract also seeks to divide teachers by introducing a reduced healthcare tier for new teachers, who will be required to use the managed care medical program in their first year, unlike veteran teachers who continue to have a wider choice of health plans. The teacher said this information could not be found in the Memorandum of Agreement distributed by the UFT but was listed in an "Appendix B," which teachers were not provided.

The contract contains some sections related to review by administration, class sizes, and a "Bronx Plan" that are meant to help sell the contract. Upon closer inspection, all these provisions are revealed as hollow gestures or Trojan horses.

Teachers will see a reduction in the number of the often-punitive and always-disruptive administrative reviews. These typically 15-minute "drive-by" observations have long been a thorn in the side of educators. However, due to the inability of the DOE to carry out the mandated assessments, the agency itself called for their reduction. But in spite of less reviews, principals and assistant principals will retain the right to walk into any classroom at any moment.

On the exceptionally important issue of reducing class sizes, the UFT's "Contract at a Glance" vaguely says it has won an "expedited process." However, the entire "process for class size" is controlled by UFT-DOE "central committees" and partnerships between UFT personnel and administration. One can rest assured that the status quo, or worse, will prevail.

The contract adds several new labor-management committees that will increase the corporatist collaboration of the union with the DOE, adding positions and perks for supporters of the UFT executives.

Finally, the UFT has presented a "Bronx Plan," which mandates that teachers in 180 hard-to-staff schools would receive an $8,000 bonus. However, there is a cap of $25,000 per school. Very few, if any, teachers in these 180 schools will see anything close to a $8,000 bonus. Moreover, the "Bronx Plan" is a means to create divisive tiers among teachers in New York, long a desire of Democratic and Republican politicians alike.

While New York City is home to the Wall Street banks and 87 billionaires awash with unprecedented sums of cash, public education is being starved. Teachers have reacted with anger to the sellout contract under conditions of a stock market bonanza. Many have decried it as "bogus" and rightly observe that this is only the latest in a long string of betrayals orchestrated by the UFT. But this understanding cannot stop there.

Along with teachers throughout the US, New York City teachers cannot find a way to defend their living conditions and attain more resources for their students within the framework of the AFT and NEA. These organizations are run by millionaires like Randi Weingarten, are allied to the big business Democratic Party and insist that educators much accept the austerity demands of the corporate and financial elite, which is drowning in wealth.

The statewide strikes by teachers earlier this year were not launched by the unions but through a rebellion by rank-and-file teachers against the decades of collusion by the unions in the corporate attack on teachers and public education. The World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter urges teachers to form new rank-and-file committees at every school. As a first step, such organizations must fight to ensure that teachers have ample time to read and discuss the contract before any vote.

These organizations should work to facilitate communication across schools and to organize collective action, rejecting the no-strike Taylor Laws and preparing demands that genuinely address the crisis of education and teachers' living conditions. Such an approach would rapidly gain support among school bus drivers and matrons, other school workers, UPS workers and the millions of workers throughout New York who are determined to defend public education. A strike by New York teachers would immediately gain the support of educators in Los Angeles and across the US and internationally. Such a fight will raise the need for a political offensive of the working class against the dictatorship of the banks and big business and for a socialist redistribution of wealth to provide for decent education, jobs, healthcare and an end to poverty for all.

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