

# New York teachers union pushes through concessions contract

Steve Light

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With four months remaining before the current contract was due to expire, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the New York City affiliate on the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), pushed through a concessions-laden contract without giving educators adequate time to study and discuss its terms.

While UFT President Michael Mulgrew falsely declared that the contract contained no givebacks, the deal continues the long pattern of concessions by including below-inflation-rate pay raises and higher out-of-pocket health expenses for the 129,000 teachers and support staff who live in one of the most expensive cities on the planet. Educators, who are still reeling from a five-year pay freeze imposed by the union in the 2009 contract, will only see raises of 2 percent in 2019, 2.5 percent in 2020 and 3 percent in 2021.

On November 4, the UFT announced that the contract had been passed by 87 percent of those who voted, with a two-thirds participation of eligible voters. The “yes” vote, however, was not a vote of confidence in the UFT. It was the result of the campaign of lies and deception and the widespread knowledge among teachers that the union would do nothing to fight for anything better even if they rejected the deal.

Delegates from the schools were called to vote at an emergency assembly the day after the settlement was announced October 11. One of the chapter leaders at a Washington Irving campus high school in lower Manhattan, who did not want his name published, told the WWS: “I felt disrespected. I received a draft only ten minutes before the emergency delegate assembly and did not have time to read it.”

Above all, the UFT and the AFT were determined to prevent a strike by teachers in America’s largest school district because they feared that such a walkout would rekindle the wave of statewide teacher strikes, which spread across West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, North Carolina, Kentucky and other states earlier this year. A strike in New York City would immediately encourage educators in Los Angeles, the nation’s second largest school district,

to rebel against the months-long efforts by the Democratic Party and the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) to block a strike for substantial improvements in wages and classroom conditions.

The previous strikes erupted in opposition to the unions, which have spent decades colluding with both Democratic and Republican politicians in endless austerity measures and the destruction of the achievements won by teachers over generations of struggle. While rank-and-file teachers initiated these struggles, the unions were able to reassert their control and defeat them. After betraying these struggles, the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA) sought to channel teachers’ anger behind the unions’ campaign for the Democrats in the midterm elections with slogans like “Remember in November.”

The bitter experiences of teachers, however, have demonstrated that Democratic politicians from Obama to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo on down have spearheaded the attack on teachers and public education just as viciously as the Republicans. The difference is the Democrats more consistently uphold the financial and institutional interests of the union apparatus as a reward for their services in attacking teachers, expanding for profit charter operations and imposing other corporate-backed “school reform” schemes.

After the Supreme Court ruling in *Janus v. AFSCME*, which ended the compulsory payment of agency fees by public sector workers who opt out of unions, Cuomo immediately moved to make it easier for the unions to get access to public sector workers and swindle them into joining the UFT and other unions. Writing the dissenting opinion in the Janus case, Justice Elena Kagan, an Obama appointee, argued that the Supreme Court had long recognized there were “important government interests” in “stably funded bargaining partners.”

In New York City, persistent underfunding, overcrowding, student homelessness, despotic administrators and privatization makes the situation explosive, and any mass dissent by teachers would threaten to reignite calls for a

national teacher strike. In these circumstances, the UFT and the AFT, pillars of the Democrat Party, were absolutely determined to head off another teacher rebellion, particularly during the midterm elections, by pushing through the contract early.

The union's attempts to sell the contract as a victory bordered on the absurd. UFT President Mulgrew, who took home \$299,119 in union salary, according to a 2017 filing with the US Labor Department, plus whatever other salaries he pulls down from other union, business and political positions, boasted that teachers and support staff were getting the princely sum of 7.5 percent in raises over 43 months. Between 2010 and 2014 teachers suffered a pay freeze under the deal the UFT reached with then Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire. For paraprofessionals, the less than \$28,000 annual salary after two years will leave them living in poverty.

The earnings of teachers and other city workers were cut by a separate agreement signed last July by the Municipal Labor Committee (MLC) that agreed to health plan cuts of \$1.1 billion on top of the \$3.4 billion health plan cuts the unions had agreed to over the previous four years.

One of the most grievous concessions was made on the backs of all new hires, who will be placed in a lower health care tier by losing the choice of health care plans. The unions sought to further divide teachers with the promise for teachers in certain hard-to-staff schools of a bonus of up to \$8,000.

Nor does the contract address the oppressive conditions imposed by school management. The welcome reduction of the minimum number of annual observations from four to two will only apply to some teachers. As a teacher in her fifth year at a Washington Irving campus school said to the WWS: "This contract was not for me. I am not tenured yet. The section that reduces lesson observations to two times a year is only for tenured teachers and does not help me." Even for senior teachers, the contract does not reduce the superficial 15-minute "drive-by" observations or the unsatisfactory rating by vindictive administrators.

The large number of students allowed in classrooms is one of the most pressing issues in the district, but the contract does nothing to address it, except for allowing for slightly quicker corrections when school administrations exceed limits. Nor does the contract seek to reduce extended teacher hours and elimination of citywide seniority given away in earlier contracts.

The contract's new guarantee of grievance procedures for unfair treatment of teachers is meaningless coming from the UFT, which has proven unwilling to defend staff from abuse, especially if they are not supporters of the union officialdom.

The main opposition to the Mulgrew's Unity Caucus in the UFT, the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), which is politically dominated by the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO), wrote in a Facebook post on October 30 that "the UFT should be applauded for negotiating minor improvements," but that "the decision was to cave on core issues. At a time when New York's mayor is a self-proclaimed progressive in the largest city in the country, we should be pushing for a bold contract."

MORE makes no effort to explain why the UFT would "cave on the core issues," boasts Mayor Bill de Blasio's progressive credentials and claims that Democratic Party can be pressured to do better. The group suggests that the union "publicly demand,"—not strike for—a better contract. When it mentions the teacher strikes across the country, MORE conceals the fact that they were begun not by the unions but through a rebellion against them.

The sellout of the New York City teachers underscores once again the burning need of educators to build new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees, which are independent of the unions and democratically controlled by educators themselves. These committees, which should be elected in every school and community, should unite teachers, students and parents in a common struggle against the bipartisan attack on public education and the funneling of public resources to educational businesses.

The fight to unify teachers in New York City with teachers across the country and internationally in an industrial counteroffensive must be combined with a new political strategy, which begins not with what the giant corporations back and big business politicians claim they can afford but what is necessary to meet the vital needs of society as a whole. This will require a frontal assault by the working class on the entrenched wealth of the corporate and financial elite so grotesquely on display in the home city of Wall Street and a radical redistribution of the wealth as part of a socialist reorganization of society.



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