

New York City school therapists protest for changes to union-backed contract

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New York City school occupational therapists (OTs) and physical therapists (PTs) protested last week against a giveback contract pushed through at the beginning of November by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). Dozens of OTs and PTs chanted and held up signs for fair pay and parity with teachers outside the UFT headquarters as educators serving as school delegates went into their monthly assembly.

This action is another demonstration of the determination of teachers to defend their living standards and stop the assault on public education despite the frantic attempts of the unions to quash their combative spirit. The OT-PT protest follows the recent wildcat strike in Oakland, California, and the charter school teachers' strike in Chicago. On Saturday, Los Angeles teachers protested while calling for a strike over poor wages and working conditions.

The majority of OTs and PTs rejected the city-wide contract last month. The UFT teachers, paraprofessionals and other school support staff were taken by surprise by the union's announcement of a new contract four months before the old one was due to expire. Teachers were not allowed adequate time to study and discuss the Memorandum of Agreement, let alone given a full copy of the proposed contract.

Rebecca, an OT for seven years working with children from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade, explained to the WSWs why she had joined the protest against the UFT. "There is no pay parity between OTs and PTs in comparison to our counterpart colleagues among teachers and speech therapists. I work a full day. We work just as hard. We work with special needs students, children who have disabilities, so our work is crucial to their success. The OT-PT functional chapter leadership wanted a better contract but told us when it was presented to vote for it. But the OTs and PTs did not

ratify it."

Responding to the claims regularly doled out to workers demanding adequate pay that "there is no money," Rebecca noted that the city had a budget surplus and was consequently able to hand out a \$3 billion tax break to the internet mega-corporation Amazon, which recently announced the building of a new headquarters in Long Island City.

The UFT collaborates in contract concessions demanded by the US financial elite even as the local government budgets show surpluses because of past stock market gains. Demonstrating the anti-worker and divisive policies of the UFT, the contract also places new teachers on a lower second tier for health care benefits, as they already have been for pensions. The UFT paraprofessionals remain at a poverty wage level of under \$29,000.

Democrats Mayor Bill de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo claimed the need to contain costs even as they issued a \$3 billion handout in tax credits to Amazon, headed by world's richest billionaire Jeff Bezos, for choosing New York City as the site of a second headquarters.

Despite previous contract givebacks, the UFT contract limited wage increases to below inflation. Therapists, like teachers, must have advanced degrees to qualify in their occupation. While teachers and therapists starting salaries are somewhat similar, they differentiate over time to the point where after a 30-year career the top salaries for therapists can be as much as \$20,000 lower than a teacher's. This also sharply affects pension levels.

Therapists, like teachers and many other professionals, begin their careers after college with large amounts of student debt. Living standards and abilities to take care of a family suffer particularly in a

city like New York, where the cost of living is astronomical.



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