

New York pre-K teachers demand pay parity, as union seeks to sabotage strike

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Eight thousand of New York City's early childhood education teachers, those working for community-based organizations (CBOs) or Head Start, have voted to authorize a strike on Thursday, May 2. Their immediate demand is for wage parity with prekindergarten (pre-K) educators in the public schools.

With a walkout by pre-K teachers threatening to develop into a direct conflict with the Democratic Party and Mayor Bill de Blasio, AFSCME District Council 1707, which like the rest of the municipal unions is closely allied with the Democrats, is sabotaging the strike mobilization. The union has told half of the teachers, those employed by CBOs and members of AFSCME Local 205, not to strike, but instead to hold a one-day protest, leaving the 3,000 educators who work for Head Start (Local 95 members) to strike alone.

Instead of uniting the working class—parents, school bus drivers, school staff and other workers—behind these embattled educators, the union has scheduled a rally for noon on Thursday at City Hall, where union officials hope to limit teachers to impotent appeals to Mayor de Blasio. AFSCME officials have cited the state's reactionary anti-strike Taylor Law, which they say governs Local 205, as an excuse to capitulate. Executive Director of DC 1707 Kim Medina emphasized to *Chalkbeat* that the AFSCME was doing all it could “to work out the union's differences with the city to avert a work stoppage.”

The union has long segregated the plight of notoriously underpaid early childhood educators from New York City teachers as a whole. On the eve of the threatened strike, Medina injected racial politics in an attempt to deepen the divide, characterizing the struggle of the mostly minority pre-K teachers as a fight against the “racist” and “misogynistic” Department of Education (DOE), which, she said, had a majority of

better-paid white educators.

News reports, however, indicate that the thousands of teachers in the CBOs, as well as many nonunion teachers, may strike anyway, despite the reactionary machinations of the unions. “It's an action that's coming from the workers,” said Gregory Brender, United Neighborhood Houses co-director of policy. Other non-profit CBOs indicated their support to the teachers, “I absolutely support the right of our teachers to go out on strike to achieve what I truly believe is rightly theirs,” said Alan van Capelle of the Educational Alliance. “I'm sick and tired of our agency and our talented staff doing the work, and not getting adequately compensated.”

Nicole Parker, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, explained, “We work more days, 240, and hours, and all summer. The DOE pre-K teachers get all school holidays off, but we only get off major holidays, Christmas and two Thanksgiving days. This applies not just to teachers but cooks and other workers in the centers.” Underscoring the abysmal wages of early education teachers, Nicole pointed out, “In the recent UFT [United Federation of Teachers] contract, paras [paraprofessionals] got raises and those who had \$13 went up to \$15 but we only got fifty cents more.”

For its part, the UFT, which signed a four-year agreement last November that provided wage increases barely above the rate of inflation, has overseen years of declining real wages. Predictably, the UFT has not called on thousands of district early childhood teachers to join in any solidarity action with their CBO and Head Start counterparts.

The starting salary for teachers in CBO daycare centers is about \$42,000 a year, barely enough to cover the median annual rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the city, much less food and transportation. Those in

the public schools do not fare much better, making an average of \$59,000 annually in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

Michelle Davis works for a non-profit daycare center in the Canarsie area of Brooklyn that is funded by the city's Administration for Child Services. She told the WSWS, "We should be granted the same equity as DOE teachers. We do a great deal caring for the children. It involves compassion, social and emotional care, especially for three- and four-year-olds. With Bill de Blasio bringing in three-year-olds, how is he going to work it? This organization [DC 1707] does not seem to know what it is doing. The children will be affected as well as the teachers' performance, and also the families as well as our livelihoods.

"We need the support of parents. We need more information so we can have the dialogue to talk to and present our case to parents. We are fighting for a cause of equal pay. So, let's be ready."

In 2014, de Blasio established the full-day Universal Pre-K (UPK) program for all four-year-old children, a feat accomplished by outsourcing 60 percent of early education to the CBOs, which pay wages only 70 percent of those hired directly through the city's Department of Education (DOE).

The mayor's plan will gradually expand to include three-year-olds, with the aim of reaching 62,000 children. This would require hiring an additional 4,500 teachers and the city would need to absorb the existing CBO day care centers as the foundation of this program. CBO-based and Head Start pre-K programs will be under the same supervisory body, the DOE. As far as city officials are concerned, the low-wages of these pre-K teachers will be used as the benchmark to drive down the wages of early childhood teachers in the public schools.

Other sections of school workers are coming into a fight. Two thousand school bus drivers employed by transportation contractor Reliant have authorized a strike to restore a job security clause that protects school bus drivers' wages and seniority if they transfer to another bus company. Nine thousand school bus drivers, attendants and mechanics fought a month-long strike in 2013 to defend the Employment Protection Provision, but the Amalgamated Transit Union capitulated to billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg who destroyed the long-standing clause.

Rather than uniting school bus drivers, pre-K teachers and other educational workers in a common struggle against the corporate-controlled Democrats, the ATU is telling workers to appeal to de Blasio and Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo, who have steadfastly refused to restore the so-called Employment Protection Plan because it would cost the city more money.

The mayor and other city Democrats claim there is no money to raise wages of educational workers even as they pour billions of dollars into tax cuts for giant corporations and real estate developers. City officials offered Amazon \$3 billion in tax breaks and other incentives to set up a headquarters in Queens and nearly \$6 billion in tax breaks and other incentives to Hudson Yards, a 28-acre complex of office buildings and luxury residential towers that is one of the nation's biggest real estate projects.

While handing out endless incentives to the rich, de Blasio has proposed budget cuts of \$916 million from city agencies, including \$104 million from school programs.



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