

Union halts New Jersey teachers' strike after one day

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Union officials in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, shut down a strike by nearly 300 teachers and support staff Tuesday, less than 24 hours after the walkout began. With a mediator from the state Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) in attendance, the Franklin Lakes Education Association (FLEA) reached a tentative agreement with local school authorities at 2 a.m. Tuesday and sent teachers and staff back to work without giving educators the opportunity to review or vote on the deal.

The agreement covers the next four years and addresses “all outstanding issues,” according to a statement from the board. But the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), of which FLEA is a member, has not made the details of the agreement public. This is because the union anticipates opposition to a deal, which no doubt ignores teachers’ most pressing concerns including crushing health care expenses. Teachers and the board must ratify the agreement before it can take effect.

The teachers’ previous contract expired in July 2017, and negotiations had dragged on since March 2017. Teachers’ main objection was that their contributions to their health care premiums were extraordinarily high. These contributions have increased thanks to Chapter 78, a law passed by the Democratic-controlled state legislature and signed by former Republican Governor Chris Christie. Contributions are calculated based on salaries, and some of the Franklin Lakes teachers pay as much as 35 percent of their salaries toward health care.

On May 30, a factfinder appointed by PERC released a report that included nonbinding recommendations for resolving the dispute, but FLEA, knowing teachers would not accept the proposal, decided to reject the recommendation. A gag order in effect until June 14 has prevented the parties from discussing the

recommendations.

By Friday, June 7, negotiators for the board and NJEA “thought they had reached a deal,” but the board later rejected it, Sharon Milano, president of FLEA told NorthJersey.com. Joseph Rosano, the board’s president, denied that a deal had been reached.

Further negotiations were scheduled for 9 a.m. on Monday, June 10. When the teachers learned at 6:30 a.m. that key members of the board’s negotiation team would not be at the meeting, they decided to walk out. A total of 276 teachers and staff at four district schools picketed in front of a middle school, starting what FLEA called the first teachers’ strike in the town’s history. Officials closed all four schools and canceled school buses before they began their routes. The district notified parents, and students who already were at school were released to guardians.

In a public statement, the board claimed that the walkout was an “illegal job action” that defied a Superior Court judge’s instruction and breached a November 2018 agreement. It said it would seek “emergency court action” to force teachers to return to work on Tuesday, June 11. The New Jersey School Board Association also intervened, commanding Franklin Lakes teachers to return to their classrooms “immediately” and promising to support the local board.

Parents, in contrast, supported the striking teachers. “It was a shock today to hear the teachers were going on strike, but I do support them. I feel like they’ve done everything they can, and the Board of Education needs to come to the table to negotiate with them,” said parent Kristen Evangelista in an interview with ABC 7.

The NJEA instructed FLEA to “continue negotiations all evening and night in an effort to resolve this labor dispute,” Meredith Barnes, an NJEA spokesperson, told

Patch. Representatives from the board and FLEA met with the PERC mediator behind closed doors on the night following the strike to reach the deal that was announced the next day.

The NJEA and FLEA have applied to Franklin Lakes the lessons they learned from last year's teachers' strike in Jersey City, and, more generally, from the wave of teachers' strikes in the US over the last year-and-a-half. On March 16, 2018, about 4,000 teachers and staff members in Jersey City struck to protest soaring health care costs. That day, a county judge ordered the teachers back to work, and the Jersey City Education Association (JCEA) capitulated, quickly reaching an agreement behind closed doors with the local school board.

The betrayal of the Jersey City strike took place right after the suppression of the teacher strike in West Virginia and on the eve of strikes in Oklahoma, Arizona and other states. Over the next several months, officials from the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) would travel from state to state in a desperate effort to prevent the revolt by teachers from coalescing into a national strike against the bipartisan assault on public education.

The Jersey City union did not immediately release the details of the agreement, nor were the teachers allowed to vote on whether to continue the strike. After returning to work, teachers ultimately learned that the agreement did not address their main demand; it offered merely a temporary pause in the premium increases mandated by Chapter 78. Together with the school board, JCEA threatened teachers with the possibility of budget cuts and layoffs to coerce them into ratifying the agreement.

The one-day strikes in Franklin Lakes and Jersey City are part of a wave of teacher rebellions that have erupted across the country and internationally to demand improved wages, school funding and classroom conditions. US educators have been joined by their fellow teachers in France's Red Pen movement and, more recently, by teachers in Honduras, Costa Rica, and Chile.

Union officials whose salaries put them in the top ten percent of income earners have betrayed teachers' interests and forced them back to work without addressing their demands. Allied with the Democratic

Party, the unions are colluding in the austerity and school privatization schemes of this big business parties while seeking to preserve the financial and institutional interests of the union apparatus.

The NJEA marches lockstep with the state Democratic Party, of which they are a critical element. The Democratic Governor of New Jersey, Phil Murphy, a former Goldman-Sachs investor, has promoted—and the Democratic-run state legislature has passed—reactionary legislation that seeks to redistribute New Jersey's ever-diminishing education resources among increasingly impoverished school districts. The result has been teacher and school staff layoffs and the imposition of new regressive local taxes. Public education in New Jersey is being systematically dismantled by both capitalist parties and prepared for privatization.

The assault on public education is part of the broader, global attack on the working class. The unions are fully complicit in this attack, and teachers, parents and students can only fight back by forming democratically controlled rank-and-file committees completely independent of the unions and the Democrats and Republicans.



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