

Baltimore teachers' contract set to expire at end of month

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The labor agreement covering 7,000 teachers in the Baltimore City Public Schools district is set to expire on June 30. The Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU) leadership, currently absorbed in an internecine power struggle following recent union presidential elections, has not issued any public statements regarding the upcoming contract. It is not clear whether negotiations have even started, and it increasingly appears that the union will force teachers to work without a new contract.

The Democratic-controlled state legislature in Maryland has still not passed a state education budget for the coming year. The debate in the General Assembly follows the release of a study from the so-called “Kirwan Commission,” which found a \$2.9 billion budget shortfall in Maryland schools. The legislation proposed by Democrats, which totals just over \$1 billion, does not amount to half of the deficit and the funds would be split over the course of two fiscal years.

Republican Governor Larry Hogan, meanwhile, has dug in his heels against the mildest increases and has demanded that every new dollar of school funding be tied to bogus “school performance” programs, which serve as a pretext for the dismantling of public education and the introduction of charter schools. State Democrats have issued toothless criticisms of Hogan’s ultimatum.

Negotiations for the current teachers’ contract began in March 2016 and the deal was ratified in October 2017. The original contract did not have a clear pay increase and only guaranteed health benefits until 2019. Instead it provided a one-time stipend of just 1 percent of teachers’ salaries. The deal provoked outrage among rank-and-file teachers.

Then-president Marietta English allowed cost-of-

living negotiations to stall until the following year. In an effort to dissipate anger from teachers in a city where a one-bedroom apartment rents for \$1,455 a month, union and district officials applied a retroactive 1 percent pay increase, with a paltry 2.5 percent raise over the following two years.

In 2010, English helped negotiate a contract that tied pay increases to “student performance,” i.e., standardized test scores, instead of automatic raises based on seniority or number of degrees obtained. Initially rejected by teachers by a 400-vote margin, the BTU pushed it through after an “information campaign” by the union, the news media and local Democrats. Obama’s Secretary of Education Arne Duncan hailed the sellout as “making teachers real partners in reform.”

Since then, teachers’ conditions have steadily worsened. In December 2018, local ABC affiliate WMAR reported that more than 2,500 teachers had left the district over the previous three years due to low pay and poor working conditions. As of April 2019, the average teacher salary in Baltimore was \$58,432. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, a first-year teacher earned \$49,648 as of January 2019. This stands in stark contrast to a survey conducted by GOBankingRates, which found that a single person would need an income of \$72,194 to live comfortably in Baltimore city.

More than 40 percent of the state’s public school students qualify for a free or reduced-price meal. The poverty rate for the 85,000 students in Baltimore Public Schools would be far higher if poor immigrant children were not deliberately undercounted. Over the winter of 2017-2018, over 60 schools—about one third of Baltimore city schools—were affected by heating problems, forcing students to wear overcoats while sitting in classrooms.

On May 15, the incumbent union president was defeated by first-time challenger Diamonté Brown, who won by a 901-839 margin. English has challenged the results, with both sides alleging voter suppression and improper campaigning. The BTU Elections Committee—appointed by English—threw out the vote and scheduled a new election. Brown responded by appealing to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which has blocked new elections pending an investigation.

While Brown postures as a “progressive” candidate, her slate, The Union We Deserve, is part of a network of so-called “rank-and-file caucuses” that claim the teachers’ unions can be reformed after decades of colluding with austerity measures of the Democrats and Republicans.

These organizations, which support the Democratic Party no less than the incumbent factions, take their inspiration from the Chicago Teachers Union, which betrayed the 2012 teachers strike and has collaborated with the Democratic mayor to close dozens of schools, lay off thousands of teachers and sharply expand the number of charter schools. The CTU is currently blocking any strike action by the city’s 25,000 teachers when their contract expires June 30, and has called for the intervention of a federal mediator.

It is significant that in Brown’s election program her only clear demand is to increase the number of black teachers working in Baltimore schools. This promotion of identity politics is utterly reactionary and only serves to divide teachers and the working class as a whole along racial and ethnic lines. The decay of Baltimore schools and chronic understaffing are not caused by racism but by capitalism, a system that subordinates the needs of all workers to the profit interests of big business. The black Democratic Party political establishment in Baltimore has defended the interests of the large corporations and the rich no less ruthlessly than their white counterparts. The only way to fight the continuous attack on public education is through a unified fight of all teachers and workers against both corporate-controlled parties.

Brown’s election comes on the heels of similar groups winning the votes in teachers’ unions in Nashville, Tennessee, and Denver, Colorado, and the sellout of strikes in Los Angeles and Oakland by unions led by so-called reform caucuses. The fact that the AFT

national headquarters did not overturn the election results in the BTU only underscores the fact that Brown will continue the same policies as her predecessor. Like her English, Brown has remained completely silent on the upcoming contract.

Only 1,740 teachers voted in the election, out of the 7,000 who were eligible. This underscores the fact that teachers to not look to any faction of the union bureaucracy to defend them. In this, they are absolutely right. To mount a real fight, teachers must form new organizations of struggle that are controlled by the rank-and-file educators and are independent of the unions and both big business parties. These rank-and-file neighborhood and workplace committees must unify all workers to defend the right to high quality public education and all the social rights of the working class.



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