

Cleveland-Heights University Heights School District threatens to halt health care benefits if teachers strike

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On November 27, the Cleveland-Heights-University Heights School District (CH-UH) located just outside of Cleveland, Ohio announced it will stop the payment of health care benefits for the roughly 500 teachers and other school employees that are planning to strike on December 2. Teachers and other school employees have been working without a contract since June 30.

The strike threat by CH-UH teachers takes place as the COVID-19 pandemic is raging out of control in Ohio and across the US amid a continued push by the ruling class to restart in person learning. Ohio is experiencing a daily average of 7,817 new cases and 42 daily deaths.

Elizabeth Kirby, superintendent of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District, said in a statement, “When public school teachers choose to go on strike, they are knowingly walking away from wages and benefits.” She also called on the leadership of the Cleveland Heights Teachers Union (CHTU) American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 795 to inform members of the retaliatory measures planned by the school district.

The district’s threat to end payments for health care to roughly 500 teachers and other school employees in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic is a brutal attempt to intimidate a growing wave of opposition by educators across the US and internationally to the homicidal school reopening policy of the ruling class. A similar attempt to intimidate school workers took place earlier this month, with a court granting a restraining order requested by local school officials against Dayton, Ohio school bus drivers, who organized a sickout over failed contract talks.

The action by CH-UH and Dayton school officials, expose the bipartisan attack on public education. Both Cuyahoga County, where Cleveland Heights is located, and Dayton are dominated by the Democratic Party.

Both areas have been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Ohio Department of Health, there have been 9,737 COVID-19 cases in Cuyahoga County and 4,344

cases in Montgomery County—where Dayton is located—between November 11 and November 24. On November 18 the Centerville schools outside of Dayton announced they would return to remote only learning after a surge of COVID-19 cases.

The department of health has also labeled Cuyahoga a “Level 3 Public Emergency,” meaning the county has a “very high exposure and spread” of the virus. Montgomery County is a “Level 4 Public Emergency,” meaning it has “sever exposure and spread.”

According to the CH-UH reporting, between November 18 and 25 there have been seven new COVID-19 cases among staff and one case among students.

As part of previous negotiations between the CHTU and CH-UH officials, the district has insisted that teachers accept massive hikes in health care premiums. A proposed tentative agreement—which was voted down by the CHTU membership in late September—called for health care premiums to increase from 6 percent to 15 percent on top of new co-pays and deductibles. The CHTU has claimed that the increase in premiums would have cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000 for many teachers.

In a show of determination the teachers decisively rejected the contract, with 89 percent of the entire membership voting against it. Out of the teachers that did vote a further 97.5 percent voted against the contract and also voted in favor of authorizing the strike.

Despite the district describing the rejected agreement as their “last, best and final offer,” the CHTU responded to the contract rejection vote in a feckless manner. Following the vote CHTU President Karen Rego stated, “We are planning to negotiate November 5, so that is positive movement.”

The union and the CH-UH, however, had been involved in close to 60 hours of negotiations between June 11 and August 19.

In September the CHTU claimed that even though the contract talks had been unsuccessful, the members had to

hold out hope that the district's offer might change if an operating levy was passed in the November election. In an exposure of the union's bankrupt perspective the district failed to offer a better deal after the levy, known as Issue 69, passed by a slim margin.

The CH-UH school board's attempt to intimidate teachers reflects fears that a teacher strike could become a rallying point for educators and other school employees throughout the state. However, teachers confront not just ruthless school officials but unions that have at every step collaborated with management in imposing attacks on teachers, above all in facilitating the reckless reopening of in person learning in the midst of the pandemic.

Even before the announcement by Kirby that health insurance would be taken away from striking school employees, the CHTU indicated that virtually no aid would be provided to cover health care costs during the strike. In a statement posted on the CHTU website, the union encouraged members to "refill prescriptions that can be refilled" before the strike started. The statement also told teachers, "If you think you're sick, hop on the computer and purchase coverage or COBRA if you prefer."

The earlier sickout by Dayton school bus drivers was carried out without the sanction of Ohio Association of Public School Employees (OAPSE) Local 627. Over half of the school bus drivers in Dayton staged an initial sickout November 13. According to testimony given to the State Employment Relations Board (SERB), 79 out of 141 bus drivers called in sick on Friday, November 13 and 47 called in sick the following Monday.

The school district immediately responded by filing a complaint to the Montgomery County Common Pleas Court on November 13. Judge Timothy O'Connell sided with the district and ruled that the bus drivers were engaged in an "unlawful strike." He also issued a restraining order, "enjoining the defendants from continuing to strike."

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Based on O'Connell's ruling bus drivers that went on strike would not receive pay or benefits for the time they called off.

Dayton, a former center of the General Motors empire, has been devastated by plant closures and deindustrialization like many former manufacturing centers in Ohio. City schools have been decimated by cuts and the city has experienced high levels of opioid addiction.

In October bus drivers had rejected a tentative agreement

between the OAPSE and the school district, but the union and district agreed that the bus drivers should continue to work under the expired contract until a new contract was reached.

A regional director for OAPSE, Jim Gollings, told the SERB that the sickout was held without the knowledge of the union leadership.

One affidavit from a bus driver also confirms that workers did not want the OAPSE to be aware of the plans to strike. According the driver she was approached by her coworkers and invited to attend a secret meeting before the strike, and told "not to let the union know" about the meeting.

The fact that school bus drivers concealed from OAPSE their plans for a sickout demonstrates the concern by drivers that the union would oppose the action and seek to prevent it. The bus drivers concerns were confirmed, on November 15, with Gollings informing the bus drivers of the court ruling and demanding that they go to work unless they were sick.

Other education related unions have responded to the ongoing pandemic and threats of austerity by seeking to avert strikes or shutting them down when they do emerge. On November 15, the Streetsboro Education Association and the Streetsboro School Support Personnel Association—which negotiate contracts for teachers and support staff in Streetsboro, Ohio—rescinded a 10-day strike notice, announcing a contract vote set for after Thanksgiving.

The frantic attempts by the union, courts and school districts to block strike action is tacit recognition that any strike of school employees could snowball out of control and spark a broader movement in opposition to low pay and deadly working conditions. In order to carry their struggles forward educators and other school employees must break from the union apparatus—which seek to keep them isolated—and turn out to workers at other schools and throughout their communities to organize broad resistance to unsafe conditions. As part of this fight, school employees should join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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