

Cleveland Heights Teachers Union calls off strike hours after picket lines are formed

Isaac Finn

4 December 2020

On December 2, the Cleveland Heights Teachers Union (CHTU), American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 795, abruptly called off a strike of roughly 500 teachers, counselors, nurses and other school employees just before the work stoppage was slated to begin. The strike had previously been called for school employees in the Cleveland Heights-University Heights (CH-UH) School District, located just outside of Cleveland, Ohio, concerning attempts by the district to impose a concessions contract with a substantial increase in healthcare premiums.

On Wednesday morning, many educators in the district set up picket lines, only to be informed hours later that the strike had been cancelled.

A joint statement issued by CH-UH Superintendent Elizabeth Kirby, school board President Jodi Sourini and CHTU president Karen Rego stated, “Due to negotiations [between the union and the district] going until 6:30 a.m., some Union members arrived to picket unaware that a tentative agreement was already near completion. We are happy that a strike was averted and students’ education will not be interrupted.”

The statement provided no details about the tentative agreement, which must be ratified by the CHTU membership and approved by the Board of Education in order to become the official contract. The members of the CHTU have been working without a contract since June 30.

The CHTU is doing everything in its power to ram through what is undoubtedly a sellout contract, with Rego telling *The Plain Dealer* that the union would hold three meetings “to educate our membership on the offer.” Rego stated that the meetings would take place on December 2 and 3, with the planned vote on the contract taking place on December 3. As of this writing, the outcome of the contract ratification vote

has not been announced.

While details of the new agreement have not been publicly released, a previous tentative agreement—which was voted down by the CHTU membership in late September—included a hike in healthcare premiums from 6 percent to 15 percent on top of new co-pays and deductibles. According to the CHTU, the increase in premiums would cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000 for many teachers.

CHTU members must reject this miserable sellout of their struggle! To carry out a genuine fight against austerity and in defense of their safety and lives, CH-UH educators must form a rank-and-file strike committee, wholly independent of the CHTU and oriented toward mobilizing the entire working class to close schools, shut down all nonessential production, and provide the resources needed to make every worker whole until the pandemic is contained.

In a clear show of militancy, teachers and other school workers overwhelming voted against the agreement presented in September and in favor of strike action. Out of the CHTU members that voted in September, 97.5 percent voted against the contract and to authorize a strike.

After the CHTU announcement of a planned strike on December 2, the CH-UH school board attempted to intimidate teachers with the announcement that the district would halt health care payments for the roughly 500 school employees planning to strike. If the strike had not been called off, the district would have cut off health care for hundreds of teachers in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Ohio Department of Health, Cuyahoga County—where the CH-UH school district is located—is a “Level 3 Public Emergency,” defined as having “very high exposure and spread” of COVID-19.

Five out of six of the counties surrounding Cuyahoga are at a “Level 4 Public Emergency” status, defined as having “severe exposure and spread” of the virus. The state’s department of health reported on December 2 that the infection rate in Cuyahoga County stands at roughly 786 cases per 100,000 people, while there has been a total of 9,712 cases between November 18 and December 1.

Despite the CH-UH school district being entirely remote—with an exception of in-person special education classes—the district has reported seven new COVID-19 cases among staff, and one student case, between November 18 and November 25.

The fact that many teachers moved to set up pickets outside of schools on Wednesday in the face of frigid temperatures and attempted intimidation by the district was a clear sign that teachers wanted to carry out a fight against austerity and unsafe working conditions. However, the union sabotaged these efforts, collaborating with the superintendent and board of education to quickly prevent the strike from taking place, instead attempting to force through a concessions contract.

The joint statement from Kirby, Sourini, and Rego describes the tentative agreement as including “important compromises for the good of our students and community.” Given that the CHTU leadership has accepted that the district is facing a budgetary crisis and the massive hikes in health care premiums demanded in the agreement that was rejected in September, the new agreement undoubtedly includes substantial concessions from teachers.

The CHTU has in fact abandoned any criticism of the district following the announcement of the tentative agreement. The joint statement by the union and district in fact claims they will “move forward as a united front against unfair EdChoice voucher laws and as proponents of fair school funding.”

The idea that educators should be joining a “united front” with a board of education that has been demanding massive concessions from teachers and only a few days ago was threatening to cut off their health care in the middle of pandemic is on its face absurd. The ludicrous policy, however, is completely in line with the attempts by the various teachers unions to channel opposition back behind the Democratic Party, which is equally culpable along with the Republicans in

the decades-long assault on public education.

While Ohio’s Republican Governor Mike DeWine announced earlier this year that he would be cutting \$355 million from K-12, similar cuts to education have been carried out in Democratic-controlled states. California Democratic governor Gavin Newsom had proposed an \$8 billion cut to K-12 education. Politics in Cuyahoga County is largely dominated by the Democrats, who have overseen years of deepening austerity.

In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which like the CHTU is also affiliated with the AFT, refused to organize a strike and this week agreed to let Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio reopen schools for in-person learning. While schools were closed last month as the city exceeded a three percent COVID-19 positivity rate, de Blasio has announced that schools will reopen on December 7 despite the positivity rate remaining above three percent.

In order to wage a struggle against austerity and unsafe working conditions, educators and other school workers must break from the various unions that are completely subservient to the interest of the Democratic Party, and fight to unify with the broader working class. To prosecute a genuine struggle in defense of their interests, CH-UH educators must urgently form an independent, rank-and-file strike committee. The Socialist Equality Party will do everything in our power to assist in this struggle, and we urge all CH-UH employees to contact us today to begin organizing.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact