

NEA and AFL-CIO face staff revolt as staff denounces “anti-union tactics”

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Office staff at the Washington D.C. headquarters of the AFL-CIO union federation and the National Education Association (NEA), the largest US teachers union, are locked in bitter struggle with union executives over contract terms.

Earlier this month members of the National Education Association Staff Organization (NEASO) voted overwhelmingly to strike NEA headquarters in Washington D.C. over demands by management for what amounts to a pay cut. According to staff union officials, NEA management is offering a pay raise far below the current rate of inflation and is demanding increases in out-of-pocket employee health care expenses.

In a statement the NEASO denounced what it called “a slew of anti-union delay tactics” by the NEA.

NEASO President Robin McLean said in relation to the NEA staff, “Let us make this clear: NEA is the largest union in the country, and its managers are asking staff to accept stagnant pay now and well into the future at a time when inflation and the cost of living are skyrocketing.” A spokesperson for the NEA said its position had been mischaracterized by the NEASO but did not further elaborate.

Also, last week the Washington-Baltimore News Guild filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board against the national AFL-CIO head office in D.C., alleging the union federation “has failed and refused to bargain in good faith.” It pointed to demands that staff return to work on site without adequate COVID-19 safety precautions.

According to a document obtained by *Bloomberg*, the AFL-CIO is requiring staff to be fully vaccinated and back in the office by July 6 unless on approved leave.

In an e-mailed statement, the Guild said that management had refused to bargain over such questions

as ventilation, masks, health risk, child care and transportation. “Instead of coming to the table and working with us to guarantee everyone’s safety, management has decided to ignore their own workers’ rights to negotiate,” said Guild Executive Director Cet Parks.

The Guild is affiliated with the Communications Workers of America. It is the bargaining agent for some 100 AFL-CIO employees, including highly paid research, tech support and policy staff.

It is significant that the AFL-CIO leadership is attempting to force its own staff back into unsafe workplaces in the midst of an uncontained pandemic. All of the unions of the AFL-CIO have sought to maintain production at workplaces throughout the country in spite of mass infections and death.

The main teachers federations, the American Federation of Teachers and the NEA, have relentlessly sought to beat down opposition among teachers and parents to the school reopening policies of first the Trump and now the Biden administrations. They have parroted the lies that schools are not vectors of COVID-19 transmission and that children don’t contract or spread the virus.

Faced with an outbreak of militant struggles by Volvo Truck workers in Virginia, Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama, Allegheny Technology steelworkers, Massachusetts health care workers and others, the unions have sought to isolate these strikes. They have tried to force inadequate wage increases and hikes in health care costs onto the workers. At Warrior Met workers voted down a sellout agreement by a margin vote of 1,006 to 45, burning copies of the contract outside the union hall. Volvo Truck workers twice voted down sellout contracts foisted by the United Auto Workers by 90 percent margins.

This is not the first time that the AFL-CIO headquarters has been accused of such practices. In 2018, the Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 2, bargaining on behalf of janitors, secretaries and accountants at the AFL-CIO D.C. offices, took a strike vote after the AFL-CIO imposed a deeply concessionary contract. Local 2 wrote, “If a company tried to force a contract like this, we believe that the AFL-CIO would deplore the company as anti-union. If we agree to this contract, we are signaling to every other union out there that they should accept those terms from their employers.”

The cuts imposed by the AFL-CIO included a wage freeze, cuts in sick time, weakened protections against layoffs, extension of the probationary period and increased weekly hours without compensation in addition to other cuts. While Local 2 never carried out its threat to strike, it did file a series of unfair labor practice grievances charging multiple violations including refusal to bargain in good faith and illegally imposing contract terms.

A class chasm separates the highly paid executives of the union apparatus and the rank-and-file workers they supposedly represent. For example, Lily Eskelsen García, former president of the three million-member NEA, had a reported income of \$616,184 according to the union’s 2018 tax filing. Then-NEA Vice President Rebecca Pringle, now current president, earned a more modest \$489,258. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, estimated net worth \$6 million, earns a reported salary of \$286,229, though this does not necessarily reflect his entire union-related income.

If the AFL-CIO and the NEA treat their own staff members in such an abusive manner, it takes little imagination to understand their deep hostility to the millions of workers in schools, mines, factories and other workplaces they collect dues from. It is another demonstration of the fact that the unions have severed any connection to the defense of workers’ interests.



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