

Allentown, Pennsylvania teachers defy union and reject mediator's contract proposal

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Teachers in Allentown, Pennsylvania, voted overwhelmingly to reject a union-backed concessionary contract on September 9, after being forced to work without a contract for over a year. They voted 499-92 against the deal, in another example of working-class opposition to pro-austerity deals backed by the unions.

On Monday, in nearby Scranton, Pennsylvania, teachers protested at Scranton High School after having been forced to work almost five years without a contract. "Right now, I'm on a schedule of seven classes a day, and they're back to back," elementary art teacher Jennifer Felter told a local ABC News outlet. "I'm expected to be up on the third level, and I'm supposed to be at two places at once."

The Allentown Education Association (AEA) has been keeping 1,200 educators and support staff on the job since the expiration of the last contract in August 2020. The previous contract, which was narrowly ratified in 2019, included retirement "incentives" to drive out experienced, older teachers, larger classroom sizes and a measly \$107 increase in starting salary for first-time teachers. Compared to school districts in the surrounding Lehigh Valley region, Allentown teachers rank among the lowest in starting pay.

After failing to reach a deal they thought they could sell to the teachers, district and AEA officials decided to bring in a supposed neutral mediator. A school board official let the cat out of the bag by emphasizing that the district faced "substantive financial issues," and it wished to balance "the needs of the union members for an increase with the financial need for the district to economize and save under the circumstances." The Allentown School District board members voted 7 to 1 to approve the mediator's proposal.

The deal would have reduced the real income of teachers, ensnaring them in a high-deductible health

plan starting in January without any wage increase. The AEA thought it could hoodwink teachers by giving them one-time bonus payments of \$2,855 instead of an increase in base pay.

AEA President Mark Leibold tried to save face with the rank and file, offering his own take on the rebuke by educators. "There's a high level of frustration already [working during the pandemic] and then, to have an offer without any money being put on the salary schedule, they rejected it ... many members would've had a net loss." Leibold could not explain why the AEA would bring back such an offer.

Allentown School District enrolls over 16,000 students and is the fourth largest school district in the state of Pennsylvania. On September 7, the Allentown School District opened for full-time in-person instruction with a supposed virtual option. Families can reportedly request such an option, which is clearly safer for teachers, students and the community alike, but officials know that many working parents will be unable to utilize it.

The seven-day moving average of COVID-19 cases in Pennsylvania sits at over 4,500 cases per day, increasing 27 percent from a week ago. Over the last month, cases have jumped 127 percent.

Underscoring the risk of opening unsafe schools, an eighth grade social studies teacher and a football coach at an adjacent school in Lehigh Valley died of COVID-19 earlier this month. Pennsylvania schools have fully reopened for face-to-face learning, with the backing of the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state and local affiliates, and politicians from both corporate-backed parties.

After several weeks of statewide in-person learning, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf enacted an

unenforceable mask mandate without ordering any other basic safety protocols, including social distancing, contact tracing and quarantines. Even if these mitigation measures were put in place, however, schools would still be hotbeds for the highly contagious and deadly Delta variant.

On a social media post, an angry parent condemned the reopening: “Another student in an Allentown school district reported with covid19. That makes it 3 already in less than two weeks and school just started. Now how as a parent am I supposed to trust sending my kids to school?”

The reopening of schools has nothing to do with the academic or mental health needs of children. It is solely driven by the economic prerogative of corporations to get parents back to work to produce profit, regardless of the human cost.

In response to this threat, educators and other sections of workers, including the Mack Volvo Group workers in the Allentown area, are building new organizations to defend both lives and livelihoods. The Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is independent of the corporatist unions and big business parties, is fighting for the immediate closure of all schools and nonessential businesses, along with full income protection for workers and small business owners, until the pandemic can be eliminated. Schools must move to all virtual instruction, with billions of dollars allocated to online education. Allentown teachers looking to eradicate COVID-19, save lives and fight against these sellout contracts should contact the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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