

Boston teachers must reject the tentative agreement reached by the teachers union

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After almost a year without a contract, the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) has reached a tentative agreement (TA) with the city for teachers to cover the 2021–2024 school years. On August 9, the union released limited details of the agreement initially set to be voted on September 8. The BTU subsequently released the full details of the tentative deal.

In a follow-up e-mail of August 23, the BTU says, “Due to a number of factors, the Executive Board voted to move the ratification vote to Wednesday, Sept. 14.” The e-mail adds in underlined text, “The meeting and this vote will be in-person ONLY.”

The tentative agreement is thoroughly rotten and should be rejected by all BTU members. It denies the existence and danger of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic for teachers, students and their families and provides an exceptionally paltry wage increase for BTU members.

Educators across the country have shown their determination to fight. In Columbus, Ohio, more than 4,500 teachers, nurses, librarians and other educators struck for the first time in 50 years as the school year began in the state’s largest district. The Columbus Educators Association, however, shut down the picket lines early Thursday morning in the dead of night and announced a “conceptual agreement”—that is, no firm agreement at all, sending teachers back to work without any of their demands having been met.

In Boston, the terms of the TA and the effort to push it through are in line with the BTU and American Federation of Teachers’ (AFT) policy throughout the pandemic. As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) wrote in its statement, *No to another school year of mass infection, death and austerity!*, “[T]he teachers unions have operated as the gendarme of Wall Street, smothering opposition of educators and students, standing by and remaining silent as thousands of teachers died or developed Long COVID.”

Since March 23, the BTU has barred members who chose to attend meetings remotely rather than risk infection from voting or speaking. The e-mail of August 23 says of an informational Town Hall meeting on the tentative agreement: “Like our first info session, this meeting will be in-person with option to **view-only** on Zoom.” This policy is designed to silence those teachers most concerned about the risk of exposure to the

virus, including those who are immunocompromised or live with others who are immunocompromised. They are effectively barred from weighing in on crucial matters relating to their working conditions.

The new agreement contains no measures to prevent mass infection, such as COVID testing, ventilation and the provision of PPE, even as the ultra-transmissible BA.5 variant surges across the country and is poised to cause a massive wave this fall once schools are opened. To understand the implications of this reckless policy, school staff need only remind themselves of last May, when according to positive tests voluntarily reported to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) by districts, just under 10 percent of all teachers in Massachusetts were infected with the virus.

The words “COVID” and “pandemic” do not appear anywhere in the 29-page agreement, or in the e-mail of August 23. The term “monkeypox” is also absent, as a second lethal disease that is being unleashed in schools across the country. The BTU, contemptuously implying that educators are too stupid to understand the agreement, informs members, “We have outlined the topline of the agreement in this plain language summary, with information on the wins we secured for special education, staff training, the wage increase, and more.”

The “wins” highlighted by the BTU are nothing short of pathetic in the context of the dreadful conditions of educators. They include miserly pay increases of around 3 percent per year that lag far behind spiraling inflation and small and mostly meaningless changes to class sizes that may be exceeded as long as the school offers undefined “compensation” or “other educational solutions.”

Teachers must reject this sellout contract. It is not only inadequate, but shows a reckless and criminal disregard for the safety of teachers, who are expected to accept ongoing exposure to ever-more infectious variants of COVID such as BA.5, currently raging throughout the country and set to explode in case numbers during the new school year, as well as the growing threat of monkeypox, which despite the lies and duplicity of the CDC, has long been known to spread through airborne particles as well as fomites. The BTU’s refusal to even mention COVID is of a piece with its role in

incrementally dismantling all mitigation measures in Boston Public Schools.

In January 2021, BTU President Jessica Tang, former Democratic Mayor of Boston Marty Walsh (now labor secretary in the Biden administration) and BPS Superintendent Brenda Cassellius signed a document titled “Side Letter Concerning Reopening Schools and Returning Students to Schools When the COVID Positive Rate is 5% or Above.” Its purpose was to force teachers back into unsafe schools to teach all grade levels, regardless of the COVID positivity rate in Boston, which at the time stood at 5.8 percent. The previously agreed-upon limit was 4 percent positivity, which was then raised without explanation to 5 percent with the agreement of the BTU, the City of Boston and the BPS superintendent.

The “side letter” stated that “if the positivity rate for COVID-19 is above 10% for two weeks BTU *may request* [emphasis added] impact bargain [sic] regarding any impacts from the COVID-19 positivity rate on BTU’s members’ terms and conditions of employment.” In other words, teachers were directed to stay in schools while the BTU leaders *could*, at their discretion, return to the bargaining table to raise demands for a return to remote teaching.

According to a BTU member bulletin released just weeks later, on February 2, teachers now had “no right to opt to remain working remotely only.” The bulletin stated, “Members who are directed in despite their preference or necessity may choose to take a leave, according to all applicable policies”—in other words, by using their sick days or taking unpaid leave.

Like the teachers, the previous agreement with bus drivers expired last summer. Bus drivers received a temporary extension that expired in November 2021. Looming over negotiations for BPS workers have been the ever-present threats issued by Jeffery Riley, head of DESE, to place the school district into receivership. Districts placed in this category are subject to virtually unlimited interference by state officials, who are granted broad decision-making powers, including hiring and firing workers at will and the micro-management of virtually any aspect of school administration.

Boston school bus drivers had been working without a contract after rejecting multiple proposals by the city, including their fourth “Last, Best and Final Offer.” In late May, the drivers’ union, United Steelworkers Local 8751, went back to the bargaining table with Democratic Mayor Michelle Wu and released a statement on May 21 urging a “yes” vote for the fifth “Last, Best and Final Offer.” The union cited the threat of receivership, and on May 24 drivers voted to ratify the contract.

Boston teachers must reject the tentative agreement and break free from the corrupt unions shackling them to the homicidal policies of local, state and federal authorities who, acting in the interests of the two big business parties, continue to downplay and normalize the pandemic, parroting the lie that COVID has become “endemic,” “mostly mild” and can only be mitigated

through vaccination.

There is now a critical teacher shortage throughout the United States, with a staggering 500,000 teachers having resigned since 2020. Boston alone is currently seeking to fill 1,000 empty positions, according to a recent report by a local news outlet. Additionally, a survey published in February 2022 found that 55 percent of all teachers were considering leaving the profession earlier than they had planned.

The immediate danger to the lives of teachers and their families, as well as the mayhem that mass infection in the school community has inflicted on the day-to-day functioning of schools, have been decisive factors in driving many teachers to seek employment in other professions. Even before the pandemic, conditions for teachers across the country had already led thousands to quit their jobs and teacher shortages were widely reported in the mainstream press. Burnout, hostile administrators, student crowding, dismal pay, dilapidated buildings, underfunding and state interference have fueled the mass exodus of professionals from the field of K-12 education for years.

Workers are beginning to draw the necessary conclusion that the fight against COVID-19 is primarily political, not simply medical, and requires a struggle against the capitalist system. Humane conditions conducive to teaching and learning can only be attained through the replacement of capitalism and its ruthless pursuit of profits with socialism, in which society is reorganized on the basis of scientific principles and the wellbeing of the entire population.

As the SEP statement says, “Teachers must harness their collective strength, unify across the country and internationally, and prepare for a nationwide educators’ strike to stop both pandemics and to demand a giant investment in public education.

“The first step is the expansion of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, in solidarity with the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), by building local committees in every school and neighborhood, independent of the trade unions and capitalist political parties.” These committees must fight to unify all educators, along with bus drivers and other school workers, to advance their demands.



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