

Outrage among Columbus teachers as union pushes through concessions contract

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Columbus teachers, parents and students are coming together to form a rank-and-file committee to spearhead the fight against the betrayal of the Columbus Educators Association and mobilize the working class for safe and quality public education. To join, please fill out the form below.

The Columbus Education Association (CEA) pushed through a concessions contract Sunday after having called off the strike by 4,500 public school teachers, nurses, librarians, counselors and other educators early Thursday morning.

The contract meets none of the teachers' basic demands: increased wages, vast improvements to school buildings and air conditioning systems, smaller class sizes and the expansion of music, art and physical education.

Most importantly, the contract makes no provisions for protection from COVID. Already as schools are opening, a new surge of cases, hospitalizations and deaths is being reported throughout the country.

The calling off of the strike and pushing through of the concessions contract by the CEA, whose parent organization is the National Education Association, is aimed at preventing a wave of teachers' strikes and struggles for improved wages, working conditions and the defense of public education. Columbus teachers, in the largest strike in the country, were forced back into the classroom just as 2,000 teachers in Kent, Washington took to the picket line.

The full language has been kept secret from teachers and it is not clear if a full contract even exists. All that the CEA has said is that they reached a "conceptual agreement," which they announced after 2:00 in the morning Thursday to justify shutting down picket lines.

At a mass membership meeting held Sunday in a minor league baseball stadium, teachers were not given

a copy of the contract but only a brief overview of what is included. After the meeting, CEA officials claimed that the contract was ratified by 70 percent.

The CEA leadership made clear that they were there not to present the contract and let the teachers decide, but to ram it down their throats. Repeatedly, officials threatened teachers that if they voted down the contract, they would still have to go back to school tomorrow and that the board and media would denounce the teachers for being greedy.

Several times, the union presenter was booed from the crowd. At one point he was explaining that the union had agreed to the board's demands that art and music teachers would have to rotate from building to building.

More booing broke out when he explained that there were no improvements to teachers' prep time, and again when he told the teachers that the union had also given in to the board's demands for cutting health benefits.

When CEA president John Conegio began speaking, delivering platitudes about the hard work of the negotiating team, someone yelled, "Back to the line!"

When it came time for teachers to speak, only three microphones were set up for the 3,000 teachers in attendance. Teachers were told they could only talk for two minutes and could either speak in favor or opposed to the contract or ask a question, but not both.

Many speakers who opposed the contract also tried to ask questions about certain aspects only to be told they had to go to the back of the line.

The first speaker, either a low-ranking union official or teacher closer to the bureaucracy, made a motion to pass the contract and was greeted and thanked from the podium. The second speaker, a school counselor at Yorktown Middle School, made a motion to reject the

contract and was met with cheers from the crowd. He was ruled out of order and told that he could only speak in favor of or opposed to the previous motion.

Another teacher pointed to the low wages teachers in Columbus earn when compared to surrounding districts and Ohio as a whole, along with the impact of inflation on wages.

Another teacher pointed out that “I will be making less with the new contract.”

Other teachers pointed to the horrendous conditions within the school buildings and that the agreement allows the board to put off installing air conditioning for another three or four years. One said, “If you are willing to wait three years for HVAC, you need to ask yourself what century you are living in.”

“I am speaking in opposition,” said a PE teacher. “I’m speaking to the HVAC. I have been fighting, I have been going to the news, I have been talking to parents, I have been talking to the community about our buildings. Not just about the HVAC. To tell me that you are not going to do anything for us until two years from now is not helping.

“I told my family that I was going to fight, and then I got pulled off the line and not told anything, and when I got this [the document with the changes] I almost fainted.” She then began talking about the problem of overcrowding in the classrooms and why teachers need smaller class sizes but was cut off and told she was out of time. The new contract did nothing to address the overcrowding in classrooms.

Another glaring concession was the outsourcing of jobs. The CEA gave their consent that teaching positions can be outsourced, as long as the company doing the outsourcing is based in the area.

Many teachers complained that with the closing down of the picket lines, the teachers had lost the momentum they had built up and the support from the community.

After fewer than 30 teachers had a chance to speak, the vast majority of whom spoke against the agreement, the CEA cut off discussion and moved for a vote.

Teachers were also admonished by the union officials not to speak to the press. Further, they were told that they are not allowed to talk to students or parents about the strike or what they were fighting for. Teachers who do could be disciplined by the district.

The meeting itself was held under the worst possible conditions. It was held outdoors in blistering heat, with

half the teachers forced to sit in the sun. Those who didn’t bring umbrellas were forced to retreat into the corridors where they could not hear or take part in the meeting.

Repeatedly, nurses were called for from the floor to assist with heat-related problems suffered by teachers in the stands. At one point, an ambulance had to be called. Teachers who could not attend the meeting or left because of the heat were not permitted to vote.

Throughout the meeting, teachers in the stands expressed their outrage to the contract.

One teacher expressed anger that the union didn’t “turn the screws.” Another teacher yelled “What do we want?” and another replied, “A better contract!” He then said, “I’m voting no.” A woman sitting near him said, “I feel the same way.”

Another person said incredulously, “We struck for 1 percent.”

“I’m hearing the conceptual agreement is hot garbage,” said one teacher. “The only thing I know is that they’re offering a 4 percent raise for three years, with inflation being over 9 percent and the union originally requesting seven.”

Another teacher said, “Teachers have a right to feel betrayed and lied to. This contract is pretty close to what BOE [board of education] was offering previously. Sounds like wording changed a bit but essentially the same. It is sad. We have teachers who stood in that blistering heat expecting this to make a real difference and they trusted their bargaining team to stand firm and get the schools our kids deserve. This contract did not do that. It just simply doesn’t. None of the ‘bullet points’ CEA used as their reasons for the strike were met. I am glad they are not outsourcing and got a better raise but that’s the only win.”

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