

Why is the UFT silent on the expiring contract for New York City educators?

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The Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Committee is hosting an online meeting on Tuesday, September 6 at 7 pm EST, “Organize a Rank-and-File Rebellion to Defend Public Education!” We urge all educators, parents, and students to register and attend.

Over a hundred thousand New York City Department of Education (DOE) employees, including approximately 80,000 teachers, face the end of their contract on September 13. Under soaring inflation, budget austerity, and an ongoing pandemic, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which ostensibly represents school workers, is approaching this upcoming deadline with a plan summed up in a single word: Acquiescence.

Now less than two weeks away, the UFT has scarcely uttered a word about the deadline, which would mean freezing wages and other provisions included in the current contract. The silence is so universal that the UFT has refused to even tweet about the issue, let alone take any steps to mobilize the membership for a public campaign.

The expiration of the teachers’ contract approaches as hundreds of thousands of other city workers are working under expired agreements. This includes municipal workers and emergency medical service workers in the DC-37 union, as well as NYC Health + Hospital workers under 1199SEIU. Additional sections of city workers are nearing contract expiration in the next few months, including sanitation workers, firefighters, and nurses.

The silence on expiring contracts by UFT President Michael Mulgrew and his fellow union bureaucrats and their acceptance of the stonewalling by Mayor Eric Adams are an extension of the unions’ role in suppressing any opposition to the city’s disastrous COVID policies. Three hundred thousand city employees have been forced back into ill-equipped workplaces, despite hundreds of workers dying and countless more becoming ill. Now the city is dropping what little remains of measures to slow the spread of the pandemic.

In the schools, Mayor Adams and Governor Kathy Hochul are following the lead of the Biden administration’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in abandoning basic public health measures to contain the virus. The updated guidance for schools in New York City no longer recommends

quarantining after a known exposure. The half-measures in place last year, including daily health screening and the in-school testing regime, are completely gone. Ventilation in many classrooms remains grossly inadequate, with the city purchasing \$90 million in substandard air purifiers from a firm with close relationships with the mayor and schools chancellor.

Educators have often described the last two years as the most difficult in their careers. After months in which the policies of Wall Street pushed them back into unsafe classrooms, teachers and students now look forward to a year in which COVID, and now monkeypox, make the spread of potentially deadly illness all but an inevitability. Furthermore, all of the consequences of a “normalized” pandemic—increased coverages due to coworker absence, students falling behind due to sickness, and a plethora of student behavioral issues related to pandemic trauma—have meant that the burdens of the past two years are falling squarely onto the backs of teachers.

The abandonment of all COVID mitigations coincides with a vindictive withholding of funds for public education. Earlier this summer, the city passed a round of school budget cuts which has led to the “excessing” of nearly 700 teachers in the system, the gutting of special education and enrichment programs, and the devastation of communities across the school district. “Excessing” is an internal DOE layoff in which educators are removed from their schools and must seek open positions in the system to continue receiving their paychecks.

New York City schools are faced with hundreds of millions of dollars in budget cuts this year, despite a marked increase in the educational and social support needs of students and over a billion dollars available in unspent federal funding. Adams has attempted to justify these cuts based on a projected drop in enrollment and the need for weaning off federal pandemic funds, which are set to expire in 2024.

But the austerity of the Democratic Party has been highly selective. Adams and the City Council made no claims of poverty when funding the New York Police Department, adding hundreds of millions to its already enormous budget. At the national level, while the Biden administration has begun cutting off funding for pandemic relief, it simultaneously has boosted military spending to record levels and funneled billions in weapons to Ukraine to carry out a proxy war with Russia.

Meanwhile, inflation stands at 8.5 percent, slightly lower than its most recent peak, which was the highest since the early 1980s. Like elsewhere globally, the cost of living in New York City has squeezed many workers to the breaking point. Rents in Manhattan now go for a median price of \$4,100 a month, with scant relief in the boroughs. Increases in the cost of food, energy, and consumer products mean a growing number of residents are forced to go without necessities.

Amid this cost of living crisis, Mayor Adams has dug in his heels and declared that city has “no money” to meet the needs of city employees. An indication of what the Adams administration is aiming for in the upcoming contracts, the city’s current budget reserves funding for raises of just 1.25 percent annually—or in real terms, a wage cut of more than 7 percent.

The gap between what the ruling class is prepared to offer and what the working class needs is staggering.

“I’m really nervous about this upcoming contract,” a New York City teacher said to the WSWS. “We need to know what is being negotiated for us, but there’s no transparency. I’ve heard that everyone involved in bargaining has signed non-disclosure agreements, which will mean that we won’t know the details of the contract until we’re asked to vote on it, which is really scary.”

“I started teaching at the end of a five-year-long contract negotiation. Don’t hold your breath for a contract any time soon,” a teacher wrote in a public online discussion group for New York City teachers.

“After two years record inflation rate we cannot even get a raise, how pathetic,” wrote another user.

At a union-sponsored online town hall on Monday, August 22, Mulgrew announced that Adams has yet to negotiate with city unions and claimed the UFT’s contract campaign would get “louder.” The vacuous remarks on a non-existent contract campaign were matched by evasions of other burning questions posed by members on issues ranging from in-school COVID and monkeypox safety measures to hiring shortages.

Many rank-and-file educators widely responded with hostility to Mulgrew’s address. Commenting on an unofficial union blog, a public school employee wrote, “I truly do not understand why we should walk back in our buildings on [September 14] and work with no contract. Our labor is the leverage! Adams is a bully, and bullies only respond to a show of strength—he’s literally laughing us out of his public events, and Mulgrew is acting like this is a normal, good faith negotiation process.”

The capitulation of the UFT to an expired contract and consequent wage freeze is not just a matter of poor leadership or mistaken strategy. The UFT, along with its fellow municipal unions, are doing the bidding of the Adams administration at a time when the social crisis is nearing a breaking point. The unions are seeking to avoid the possibility of a contract struggle catalyzing and merging with other brewing struggles, including

the fight to fund public schools adequately and to stop the pandemic.

Mulgrew, who draws a salary of well over \$300,000 a year, acts on behalf of a bureaucratic apparatus that is fundamentally hostile to the interests of rank-and-file teachers. Any action by workers that challenges their ability to function in “partnership” with the political parties of big business—thereby threatens their privileges—will be bitterly opposed.

The strivings of workers for a rebellion against intolerable conditions are beginning to emerge in the US and internationally. Teachers in Columbus, Ohio, school workers in Philadelphia, and educators in Washington state have walked out on strike at the start of the school year. Throughout Europe, workers have responded to out-of-control inflation with mass industrial action. In Sri Lanka, protests and strikes forced out a hated government.

The most conscious expression of this phenomenon is the campaign by Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman for president of the United Auto Workers. Lehman is running on a socialist platform to abolish the labor bureaucracy and transfer power to the rank-and-file. Speaking directly to teachers at a public online meeting of the US Educators Rank and File Committee on Saturday, Lehman stressed the initiative that workers must take. “As workers, you need to turn to other workers you’re around to build these rank-and-file committees,” he said. “It might seem daunting, but the reality is that the capitalist class is going to take more and more. They do not care about the damage they inflict on the workers. That’s why we need to start now and need to organize now.”

To carry out a real fight for good wages, fully funded schools, and policies to end COVID, New York City educators must cast aside the thoroughly rotten UFT apparatus and build rank-and-file committees. The starting point must be with what workers and students need, not what the representatives of Wall Street say they can afford. We encourage all New York City educators to attend the online meeting on Tuesday, September 6 at 7 p.m. EST, “Organize a Rank-and-File Rebellion to Defend Public Education!” to learn more.



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