

New York City teachers union prepares sell-out contract with city

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On Tuesday, September 13, the day the contract between New York City's Department of Education (DOE) and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) expired, Michael Mulgrew, the union's president disavowed any attempt—even the smallest or exclusively symbolic—by the union to fight to improve the living conditions of its members.

After months of silence on the contract, Mulgrew said in a letter to its members:

“The UFT is ready and willing to sit down at the bargaining table with the city to negotiate the next DOE-UFT contract ... the [Democratic Mayor Eric] Adams administration, however, has yet to begin bargaining with any municipal union and is crying poverty despite having deep financial reserves.”

The UFT has issued no demands for pay raises to meet inflation, let alone improve educators pay, or for adequate medical care or for better working conditions. This is despite the fact that educators work and live in one of the most expensive cities in the world and have seen their real income decline for years. Mulgrew and other UFT officials have excluded any talk of a strike by 100,000 UFT members, or any other form of struggle, over the lack of a contract and the city administration's intransigence.

Adams is, in fact, preparing a vicious assault on the living conditions of city workers, as Mulgrew knows full well. The city is not “crying poverty” but beginning to implement a program of sweeping austerity.

Already hundreds of educators have been “excessed” (removed from jobs and put into a pool of unassigned educators) because of a \$375 million budget cut to schools over the summer. Whole school programs have also been cut out.

Despite the rhetorical opposition from the UFT and the Democratic city council members who voted for it in the first place—the cuts remain in place. As the school year started after Labor Day, 300 early childhood Instructional Coordinators and Social Workers discovered, without warning, that the city had removed them from their jobs.

Now Adams has implemented further cuts. On the same day the contract expired, Adams announced that he had asked city agencies to cut budgets by 3 percent this year and by 4.75 percent in the next fiscal year, which begins in July.

Warning of the likelihood of recession, he has proposed these

cuts “so our city can weather these turbulent times.” State authorities have warned that the city budget could face a \$10 billion budget shortfall next year. A recession, which is being deliberately provoked by the Federal Reserve Board to discourage workers from seeking higher wages, would worsen the indebtedness of New York City, which already sits on a mountain of over \$100 billion in debt. While Democrats and Republicans demand “sacrifice” from educators and school children, the Biden administration has endless resources to fund wars against Russia and China.

Educators responded with disgust and hostility to Mulgrew's letter. One special education teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “A lot of people at my school had no idea our contract had expired until I told them. People don't have faith in the negotiations which are happening behind closed doors. Someone told me the [bargaining] committee members had to sign NDAs [Non-Disclosure Agreements]. Regardless, we won't be informed about what's happening until the last minute, then will be rushed to vote on it and told it's the best we'll get.”

The members of the UFT bargaining committee have indeed signed an NDAs. This is because the union officials fear if educators get wind of the details of the sellout agreement the UFT is preparing they would face a full-scale revolt from the rank and file.

In the September 13 letter, Mulgrew refers to the “labor strategy” of the billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who, from 2009 until he left office in 2014, “sought to stall negotiations to make workers desperate and willing to settle for less.”

But Bloomberg's strategy would have been impossible without the collusion of the UFT and other city unions, which suppressed a mass mobilization of educators and municipal workers to demand a decent contract. The strategy of “making workers desperate” through delay was the UFT's own strategy. Mulgrew's reference to this is a signal to the Adams administration that the UFT is more than willing to reprise its role in the current negotiations.

The contract workers eventually got under Bloomberg's successor, Democrat Bill de Blasio, was a travesty. Behind the scenes, the UFT and other municipal unions collaborated with

city officials to chop hundreds of millions in retiree health benefits, eventually agreeing to a Medicare Advantage privatization scheme, which retirees universally opposed.

The 2018 contract also placed newly hired teachers on a second tier for health care benefits and allowed paraprofessionals to start their careers at \$29,000 a year—below the official poverty threshold in New York City. The five-year pay raises were 2 percent in 2019, 2.5 percent in 2020 and 3 percent in 2021. This led to a deep cut in real wages as inflation rose to 9 percent.

Occupational Therapists (OTs) and Physical Therapists (PTs) who work with special needs children were denied any parity with other educators, which led to protests by these workers at the UFT headquarters. The UFT unit of OTs and PTs voted against the 2018 contract.

Working off its thoroughly undemocratic playbook, the UFT deprived teachers of enough time to study and discuss the Memorandum of Agreement and were not even given a full copy of the proposed contract before they voted on it. That is because the UFT knew if workers knew what was coming, including horrific cuts to retiree health benefits, they would have rejected the deal overwhelmingly.

But educators have learned a thing or two. On top of that, the world of 2022 is fundamentally different from 2018, and educators who have sacrificed throughout the pandemic and watched their colleagues and students get sick or even die, are determined to fight. They watched Trump and Biden hand out billions to Wall Street and seen the private fortunes of the rich soar; and they know it's a lie to say there is no money for decent wages and fully funded schools.

Schools are a disaster, worse even than the decaying educational system that existed until February 2020. Thousands of educators have retired or quit because they did not want to expose themselves to the COVID virus in the overcrowded city classrooms.

COVID mitigations have been systematically dismantled. Students and staff are no longer required to mask, ventilation in classrooms is poor, and educators are now reporting that students are again getting sick in class. Testing is done entirely by take-home tests whose results are not recorded and contact tracing has been stopped. On Friday, the Department of Education (DOE) shut down its COVID-19 Report Card webpage, which aggregated COVID data from city schools. Currently the city's test positivity rate—certainly a gross underestimate, since most cases are no longer reported—is 9.5 percent. Monkeypox has been discovered in young people.

All of this is the product of a deliberate policy by the UFT and other unions, which have enforced a deadly government policy to teachers and students back into schools so their parents could produce corporate profits. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, who worked long hours to promote school reopening, is a despised figure among educators.

In the last several months, millions around the world have joined an upsurge of the working class, including rail workers in the United Kingdom and the United States, nurses in Minneapolis and California, teachers in Seattle and Columbus, and university staff at the University of Sydney, Australia. In Sri Lanka, millions of workers and rural poor have opposed the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

But the most significant factor has been the beginnings of rank-and-file rebellion against the unions themselves as workers fight to break through the barriers to a struggle for wages and working conditions.

These have been most clearly expressed by the development of the global rank-and-file committee movement. In May 2021, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees was founded to globally coordinate struggles that have begun to emerge. Last week, over 500 workers attended the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee to plan their strategy in opposition to the alliance of the Biden administration, the rail unions, and the rail companies to keep workers on the job in insufferable conditions.

Educators around the world have also come together to form independent committees of action, including the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The rank-and-file safety committee for New York City educators, now a part of the Northeast Educators Rank and File Committee (NEERFSC), was formed in August 2021 with the goal of developing strike action to stop COVID-19 and forming committees at the building level to ensure safe working conditions.

The goal of the NEERFSC is not to appeal to the UFT to produce a better contract, which it will not do. It is to organize and mobilize educators independently of and in opposition to the corrupt AFT apparatus and develop new centers of decision making and control by the rank and file.

The committee fights for what educators need, not what politicians like Adams and their union toadies say is affordable. That includes ensuring their most basic needs from COVID safety, to inflation-busting pay raises and cost-of-living adjustments, to infusing billions of dollars into public education. Educators who want to take up this fight should contact the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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