

New York City retirees protest attempts by Adams administration and unions to slash health benefits

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21 October 2022

On October 12, an estimated 250 retired municipal workers protested against the ongoing effort by New York City's Democratic Mayor Eric Adams and the unions that make up the city's Municipal Labor Committee (MLC) to slash retirees' medical benefits. The retirees rallied outside City Hall and marched to the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) headquarters near Wall Street where a Delegate Assembly was taking place that afternoon.

The protest, organized by a group of retirees who formed the New York City Organization of Public Service Retirees in August 2021, is the latest episode in a year-long struggle between retired workers on one side and the city and municipal unions on the other. In 2018, the city and the MLC agreed to substantially cut healthcare costs by 2021. Last fall, the administration of former Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a plan to switch the city's 250,000 retired municipal workers from Medicare to a privatized "Medicare Advantage" plan.

The new plan saves the city over \$600 million by shifting costs onto retirees. Medicare Advantage, according to the Daily Poster, "would change the out-of-pocket costs of those impacted from a maximum of \$1,053 per year to up to \$7,550. It could also force retirees to find new doctors, as many doctors don't accept Medicare Advantage plans, and could require prior authorization for procedures, which tends to lead to high claim-denial rates."

After a group of retirees sued the city over its attempts to force through Medicare Advantage, a Manhattan judge ruled in March that it would be illegal for the city to impose a fee of \$191 per month on retirees who opt to keep their current insurance. Under the city's Administrative Code 12-126, the judge ruled, the city must fully cover the cost of health insurance for city retirees.

The city and the MLC temporarily backed off on imposing the plan. But in September, the Adams administration, again backed by the MLC, issued a formal request to the City Council to amend Code 12-126 so that the plan can be

forced through.

The Democratic Party-dominated City Council is reportedly reluctant to amend the code, particularly since the council was the object of derision as recently as last month after it voted to pass Adams' massive cuts to the education budget. The cuts forced the excessing (a form of internal layoff) of hundreds of educators and the wholesale closure of critical programs. After an outcry by educators and parents, the Council made a show of opposition and sought to sponsor a re-vote. Some parents and teachers took the city to court, but the city's cuts have been allowed to go forward on appeal.

The blatant, corporatist collaboration between the city government and the MLC has thoroughly exposed the Democratic Party and the union bureaucracies for what they are: servants of Wall Street.

Since the bailout of the banks in 2008, the American ruling class has demanded that workers pay for the mountain of fictitious capital that quantitative easing pumped into the stock market. This process has vastly accelerated since the passage of the CARES Act in March 2020, an even bigger bank bailout than in 2008. The city's plan to shift healthcare costs onto retirees is one component of these broader class war efforts.

Throughout the pandemic, unions throughout the US have collaborated with the ruling elite's back-to-work and back-to-school drive at every stage. The UFT played a critical role in reopening schools for in-person learning in New York City, the largest school district in the US, beginning in Fall 2020 before any educators or students were even vaccinated. More recently, the UFT has refused to take up a fight for a better contract when city educators' contract expired on September 13, let alone fight Adams' massive budget cuts.

World Socialist Web Site reporters attended the protest and spoke to retirees. The retirees expressed enormous anger, particularly toward the unions. One protester, Wanda Williams, said, "Member-driven and member-approved is

what I'm saying. No top-down propositions. It is anti-democratic, anti-union action by unions. There has not been adequate communication among unions. Membership has not been engaged."

Paul, a retiree who had worked as a Fire Officer for 28 years, told the WSWS, "In collective bargaining, we've had two years of double zeroes. The healthcare was part of the collective bargaining givebacks. There was a lack of education about that and there were things going on behind closed doors. They have problems for healthcare and the financial system because Wall Street is gambling, like betting on a horse. And when they lose, they want to change the rules, midstream. Bait and switch."

A fellow retiree who had worked 25 years as a Fire Officer added, "This is happening while the *New York Times* writes about the miscreants in the Medicare Advantage companies that are committing fraud by pushing doctors to add to their diagnoses of patients to get more money from Medicare."

Loril Swan, who retired from her career in information technology (IT) in New York City's Human Resources Administration, said, "The attack on our healthcare is from both former Mayor de Blasio and now Mayor Adams... The unions are still lying to actives [in-service workers]. People are here getting together. The politicians are being non-specific in their answers to us. They claim to have not read the bill yet."

A non-retired IT worker who was with Loril added, "In 2014, [UFT President Michael] Mulgrew had the city take money out of the Health Care Stabilization Fund to pay for active teachers' wage increase. The city wants to get out of what they are paying for our benefits... The federal government is supporting Medicare Advantage plans so the corporations can make private profits with public money."

A WSWS reporter asked Jose Bribiesca, a retired high school history teacher, whether he thought the protest would succeed. He said, "The protest is trying to pressure the City Council. If it works or not, I don't know. To raise the consciousness of people is what is needed. Socialism always appealed to me. This [protest] is not trying to connect the domestic and international issues, like when they give \$50 billion to Ukraine but don't want to give \$15 an hour pay to workers... We have to say no to war, no to NATO."

Just as the protest was happening, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) with which the UFT is affiliated, was wrapping up a pro-war tour in Ukraine and deliberately covering up the role of Ukrainian fascism in the Holocaust.

There is a direct connection between Weingarten's support for the goals of American imperialism in Ukraine and the unions' staunch support for budget-cutting in medical costs and education programs: the interests these

organizations serve are those of the wealthiest layers of American society. It is abundantly clear that the social interests of the union bureaucrats are diametrically opposed to those of municipal retirees.

In-service and retired New York City workers should form rank-and-file committees that will act independently of the union bureaucracy, in solidarity with the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (NE ERFSC) and as part of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which is fighting to unite all workers across industries and national boundaries.

In its most recent statement, "The crisis in education and the case for rank-and-file committees," the NE ERFSC wrote, "In this explosive situation, every educator, student and parent who stands up now to build a rank-and-file committee can play a decisive role in leading the immense struggles of the working class on the immediate horizon." The NE ERFSC also seeks to organize retired workers for the coming struggles.

The NE ERFSC statement points to the significance of the campaign of Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, who is running for president in the United Auto Workers (UAW) union based on dissolving the union bureaucracy and placing its billion-dollar assets under the democratic control of the rank-and-file.

Will's campaign has reached an audience of thousands of workers and he has urged every worker who supports his campaign to form a rank-and-file committee at their workplace or neighborhood. Will is holding an online meeting on Sunday titled, "Build rank-and-file power to fight layoffs and concessions!" City workers in New York, retired and active, are invited to attend.

Retired city workers who agree with this perspective should join the NE ERFSC.



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