"We live in a constant state of limbo"

New York City educators speak out against attacks on early childhood education

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Hundreds of New York City educators rallied last week at the city's Department of Education (DOE) headquarters in lower Manhattan to protest the "excessing" of over 400 instructional coordinators (specialists who help educators develop age-appropriate class plans) and social workers from the city's early childhood development program.

The excessing, in which educators are removed from their jobs and put in a pool of casual educational labor until they can find a new position in the school system, came without warning in September as the new school year started. Over the summer, the Democratic administration of Mayor Eric Adams had already excessed hundreds more educators, destroying scores of art and music programs because of budget cuts. Adams has also implemented budget cuts of 3 percent to most city agencies and promised more cuts next fiscal year for the DOE.

The crisis of early childhood education in the city extends well beyond the excessing of staff. The city currently is in arrears for $140 million in subsidies to non-profit Pre-K providers. Some of these providers have had to close. While Schools Chancellor David Banks has promised that the DOE will pay up, there has as yet been no concrete action.

The rally reflected two hostile and opposed social elements: the majority—workers who have been excessed or their colleagues who are outraged by the excessing, on the one hand—and, on the other, the bureaucracy of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). Both groups shared the podium, but little else.

Rank-and-file early childhood educators described the essential role that instructional coordinators (ICs) and social workers play in early childhood education and called for a fight to stop the excessing. UFT officials bellowed and ranted and called for workers to wave their blue UFT kerchiefs and chant and made ad hominem attacks on various DOE officials (though not the mayor, whose name was barely mentioned), but offered no plan of action for fighting the cuts.

UFT members are currently working without a contract, a fact that was not mentioned by official UFT speakers. Nor was there any mention of the strike by 55,000 education workers in Ontario, including many early childhood educators. No union bureaucrat so much as hinted at the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in city schools and the absence of mitigation measures, or the high rate of hospitalization of very young children from this and other respiratory diseases.

Early childhood educators are being kept in the dark about their status. One curriculum instructor described to the *World Socialist Web Site*the pattern of insulting and arrogant behavior of the DOE: "We were thinking that we were going full speed ahead with this school year because we had been assured at the end of the previous school year that our jobs were secure."

Suddenly, according to the IC, "there's a press release [from the DOE] saying that a restructuring [of early childhood education programs] was happening. We didn't know what that meant. We come back to work the next day and we're called into a Zoom meeting, and we are told that we are all excessed by the end of the day. We received letters of excessing telling us to go and look for another position and that they're restructuring, and the DOE wanted everybody to reapply for newly imagined positions. That posting [of those positions] was supposed to come out by later that week. We're still waiting for that posting. A lot of that is because the reimagined version of the position is the same as what we're currently doing.

"We reached out to the press, let them know what was happening. And so, then DECE [Division of Early Childhood Education] central leadership said, 'OK, we're not going to reinstate you, but go back to your previous duties.'

"And we're still in that situation right now. We were excessed by letter, but not in the system. Now we're excessed in the system and by letter, but also being told to continue with our jobs as usual."

The instructional coordinator noted that in addition to the excessing, "there are subcontractors that have been hired that are doing our work at the same time. We're very unclear about what is happening. We are having responsibilities added to us as they're restructuring aspects of the job. My suspicion is that there's going to be an attempt to privatize a lot of this."

Another excessed IC explained, "The city cut our positions only after the schools had already opened, so even though the need is there for the jobs for which we are worthy, the positions

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are not available. We should be there supporting new teachers, to keep the schools from losing children, to support parents and families. I work with teachers in 14 schools, 56 classrooms, which equals 896 children. We coach the teachers every week or once a month."

A social worker told the WSWS: "We live in a constant state of limbo, waiting for the other shoe to drop. We're working and we're doing our job the same way we did it all the other years. There is little and no communication from the DOE about our situation and what's happening. I feel very sad speaking as a teacher for a very long time and as a parent. We want high quality education, and this is where it begins."

Noa, a high school teacher who had come to support her fellow educators, said: "Some high school teachers have been excessed as well, people who really mattered to the kids. And it's horrible, right? I teach newcomers to this country. But we don't have enough social workers. There are never enough people like these. Some of my students are homeless. They're suffering a lot. They need help. They need our programs, and these are the programs that are being cut under Eric Adams's agenda and with the people he's put into these department roles."

Noa knew that Adams had promised more budget cuts to education next year and that he had made a further 3 percent cut in most city agencies this year. "That's something we're all terrified of," she said "and everyone's just sticking together and trying to support each other. And I hope that showing up here is part of that."

Of the striking Ontario workers, Noa said: "I would just say that my heart goes out to them completely. I know that every day they do what they do, they're a hero, and it's amazing that they're up against those odds and still out there."

The WSWS asked another DOE employee why she had come to the rally. "I came out today because I've been working for about eight years in the DOE," she said, "and the last several months have been like the most chaotic and difficult of my entire career.

"I've seen a lot of colleagues being excessed, being confused about what the status of their job is. We're worn out. There's been no collaboration with the incoming administration, and I think our schools are suffering. We're told that we can't explain to the schools why we can't pay them. We just have to keep on and we can't name who's responsible. A lot of pressure is being put on us and blame when really we're doing everything we can to support these folks."

Sarah, an associate director of a community-based organization Pre-K center, was at the rally both to support the excessed workers and to insist on the need for early childhood education, not least of all for her two-and-a-half-year-old son, who attends the school. "I am in DC 37 (New York City's largest public employee union)," she said, "and called them to invite them to join this rally but they did not even respond. There is huge concern from the community and educators' standpoint if there is any hope of closing the education gap resulting from the COVID pandemic.

"Pre-K teachers had not been making the same pay as teachers working for New York City, but when we were made part of the New York City Pre-K program we got a raise. Now we face losing this. There is also a real drive to push the cost of raising a child, and medical care too, as with the [city-union] measure against retiree health care, onto the family and the individual."

Brenna, a social worker from an elementary school, was at the rally to give her support. She told the WSWS: "Because of Mayor Adams' budget cuts, the early childhood social worker in my school is gone. There is no one to pick up their slack. They help parents and children just coming into the school system. So, the social workers are not there for all the immigrant refugees that the city says it is helping.

"The cuts to education have a long-term effect. Growing is like scaffolding. If children do not get help when they are younger, if they fall off the ladder, the problems will be bigger when they are older. They make these cuts, they cut down health care, but it is the CEOs that need to be cut down."

Supporters of the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (NERFSC) distributed 125 copies of a leaflet that contained excerpts of a statement by the committee on the crisis of education, reports on the Ontario education workers' strike and the campaign of socialist Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman for the presidency of the United Auto Workers union.

Pre-K workers concerned about the attacks on early childhood education should contact the NERFSC to prepare independent action to unite workers and stop the assault of the Adams administration on education.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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