

# Teachers union pushes through sellout contract to avert a strike in Akron, Ohio

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On Sunday evening, the Akron Education Association (AEA) reached a last-minute deal with the school district, preventing a planned strike by 2,800 teachers, librarians, school counselors and other educators that was to start on Monday. The concessions contract agreed to by the union effectively cuts teachers' pay and meets none of their demands for safe working conditions.

The contract was reached in closed-door negotiations between Akron Public Schools (APS) and the union, in which several school board members took part as well as a federal mediator from the Biden administration who pressured the union to accept the deal. Without any chance to see or vote on the contract, teachers were ordered by the union to cancel their strike plans and report to their classrooms on Monday.

Teachers were only shown some highlights of the contract on Tuesday during a union meeting. They were not given a chance to see the full contract or have any time to study and discuss the details before the union required that they vote on the deal, which ultimately was approved.

The new contract includes wage increases of just 4, 3 and 3.5 percent, well below inflation in each year of the three-year contract. In fact, teachers who have been without a contract since June have already lost their entire first year increase and much of the second as prices continue to soar at an official inflation rate of 8 percent but in reality much higher for the working class.

Union officials had teachers working without a contract since June, when their last contract expired. Late last year, teachers voted by 99 percent to reject a proposed contract submitted by a "fact finder" and authorized the union to call a strike. Finally, on December 29, after APS refused to negotiate in good

faith, the AEA issued a 10-day strike notice.

Teachers were set to hit the picket lines on Monday in what would have been their first strike in decades. The district responded by hiring a strikebreaking firm, HuffMaster, to recruit replacements for the striking teachers and had planned for all students to attend online sessions to take attendance and pass out homework. These measures have nothing to do with educating students but were to insure the district continued to receive state and federal funding that is tied to attendance.

It is most likely that there is no formal contract, and it will be months before teachers learn the full extent of the contract. News accounts have only reported a few other details of the settlement which the union has classified as "highlights" and "victories."

In addition to the wage increase, the share of health care premiums that teachers pay will remain the same. Teachers will receive five additional sick days if they contract COVID-19, a danger which remains of great concern to teachers, parents and students after the scrapping of all mitigation measures in schools and as new variants of the virus circulate throughout the population.

Both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), together the largest unions in the country, have played a horrendous role in the spread of COVID-19, pushing for the early resumption of in-person learning, which contributed to the spread of the virus.

The five additional sick days, down from the 14 days which had been part of past COVID-19 relief measures, again demonstrates that the NEA is unwilling to take the necessary measures to protect teachers.

Regarding the major concern of teachers over the increased levels of school violence, the school district

backed down on changes to what is classified as an assault. The district had wanted to require that a teacher be “injured,” rather than the current language which includes any “contact.”

APS has one of the highest suspension and expulsion rates of any school district in the state. The school board can now falsely claim that it, not the teachers, is concerned about student behavioral problems not being addressed solely as disciplinary problems. Such a claim against teachers is blatantly false, as the teachers work every day to educate students and meet their needs.

The problem of violence in Akron schools is the product of mounting social tensions in the largely working class district. Neither the union nor the Akron Public Schools seeks to address the root of the problem—the intense social crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, that confronts teachers, students and the broader community.

The Akron-Canton area has one of the highest poverty rates in the state. The official poverty rate is 23 percent in Akron and over 30 percent in Canton. For children it is even higher. Median household income is just over half of the average throughout the United States in Akron and below half in Canton.

Since the Biden administration has declared that the pandemic is officially over, additional aid to schools, students and families has been cut. Programs that provided funds for additional school counselors and social workers have been cut. The free school lunch and breakfast programs for all students have been eliminated. The expanded child tax credit was eliminated in January 2022, driving many families into poverty.

Many working and low income families are faced with making decisions about paying rent or buying food, clothing or even medicine. Poverty rates are sure to rise as these cuts take effect, and workers are faced with near double-digit inflation.

Every day, working class and low income communities are confronted with continuous harassment and violence from the police. Last year, 25-year-old Jayland Walker was shot over 60 times by Akron police as he attempted to flee.

While the police responsible have gone largely unpunished, Akron’s Democratic Mayor Dan Horrigan sanctioned a police riot against people voicing their outrage over Walker’s brutal murder.

It is the conditions of social inequality and the lack of any social movement to fight these conditions that is the cause of violence among students. Only as part of a broader working class movement against war, inequality and social injustice will youth see a future.

The past two years have seen a growing movement and struggles of educators, nurses and health care workers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class throughout the US and internationally. Far from uniting these struggles in a common battle to change the system, the union bureaucracies have worked to suppress the movement, isolating and betraying every struggle.

To carry out a genuine struggle to guarantee the right to a quality education for all will require a break from these corrupt bureaucracies and the building of new organizations controlled by rank-and-file educators that unites with workers internationally to challenge the capitalist system. The Pennsylvania-Ohio Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee invites teachers to join our committee and take up this fight. Fill out the form below to receive more information.



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