# Six months without a contract: New York City educators must take the struggle into their own hands

**Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee**
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The tentative labor agreement announced on February 17 between District Council 37 (DC37) and the Democratic administration of Mayor Eric Adams, covering thousands of New York City office, medical, library and educational workers, including school cafeteria workers, has rightly alarmed educators. They know a similar betrayal is coming, brought to them by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT).

But a below inflation raise—that is, a cut in real pay—is only the next step in the assault by the Democrats against education and educators, as well as all city workers.

In New York, along with health care itself, the impact of the pandemic has been felt nowhere more than in the schools.

Scores of educators have died. Hundreds, at the very least, have been disabled with Long COVID, thousands will face permanent health repercussions from the disease, and tens of thousands are still exposed to these threats in school buildings every day.

City and state officials have now lifted all COVID-19 mitigations in schools, including mandatory masking, social distancing, systematic testing, and contact tracing—which were never seriously implemented to begin with—and remote schooling. The city has insisted on face-to-face learning during the latest surge of the XBB.1.5 Omicron variant, which has killed at least seven children in the city in the last few months.

Recently the media and public health organizations have followed the Biden administration in implementing a near-blackout on information about the disease. Almost nothing is left for the working class to gauge how the pandemic continues to impact the population.

The country's largest school district has been systematically starved of funds for years, but it is now ravaged by a teacher shortage because of resignations and retirements due to the city's pandemic policies. Classes are crowded and the remaining educators are overwhelmed. Waves of sickness from COVID and other respiratory diseases now engulf the schools at least twice a year, with all the effects they have on learning.

The Department of Education's answer to the conditions that the pandemic created has been, at the behest of the Adams administration, to make a minimum of $215 million in budget cuts last year and shut down dozens of arts programs throughout the city because it excessed their educators. It also excessed 400 early childhood educators, and while their jobs have been saved this year, there is no guarantee that they will be safe next year. According to several sources, the Adams administration intends to privatize their jobs.

New York Schools Chancellor David Banks has warned that the state's mandate to shrink class sizes will require even more funding cuts in other areas, and Mayor Adams has proposed budget cuts across all city departments. The Democratic politicians in the state legislature will, of course, create the best conditions for private charter schools. Both Governor Hochul and Mayor Adams are seeking to lift the cap on the number of charters in the city from the present 275 by as many as 108.

Far from spending money on social needs, the Biden administration is allocating vast sums to a proxy war with Russia in Ukraine. American imperialism's declining economic power globally means that it must confront both Russia and China militarily. We are in the antechamber of World War III, with the possibility of nuclear annihilation.

In the short term, public school workers and children will be forced to pay for the war in Ukraine through austerity. Because of inflation—itself a direct result of endless bank bailouts, the war and pandemic policies—New York educators have now taken a de facto pay cut for nearly six months since the last contract. That contract itself was inadequate and damaging to education workers, from physical therapists to new-hires to retirees.

This is the responsibility of the UFT bureaucracy, which has played the key role in the decline of its members' living standards and in endangering the health and safety of its members. The policies of the highly paid leaders of the UFT and the national American Federation of Teachers flows directly from the dictates of the Democratic party—a party of war, mass death COVID policies and austerity.

It is highly significant that city officials have also indicated that other areas of the city budget will be cut to pay for DC37 members' minuscule raises. Already the Municipal Labor Committee, of which DC 37 and the UFT are the most powerful members, has announced its determination to save the city $600 million annually by privatizing the health care plan of a quarter million retirees from city employment. These budget cuts will certainly not come from the New York Police Department's budget.

The UFT bureaucracy's performance during the pandemic has been unscrupulous. This is the organization that, from September 2020, has ensured that increasing numbers of children, staff, and educators work and learn in areas exposed to the COVID-19 virus. The UFT has enforced every move by the de Blasio, Adams, Cuomo, Hochul and Biden administrations to open school buildings and eliminate testing, mask mandates and social distancing.

Now the UFT is maintaining a resounding silence on the status of contract negotiations. Not only has it violated the principle of "no

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contract, no work," it has said nothing about its aims and goals or the status of its negotiations with the city. It has forced the bargaining committee to sign non-disclosure agreements.

The negotiations must be resolved to benefit educators and all city workers. There are trillions of dollars in surplus wealth in the investments, multiple mansions and luxury apartments, yachts, and private aircraft of the super-rich.

That wealth is produced by the working class and must be used for the needs of the working class. A struggle for a decent contract begins with the refusal to compromise on the needs and social rights of educators and other city workers.

Rank-and-file educators must take this struggle out of the hands of the UFT bureaucracy and prepare an all-out fight against the Adams administration, the Democrats and Republicans in Albany and the financial and corporate interests behind them.

Both the ruling Unity Caucus and the loyal opposition caucuses organized in United for Change (UFC) seek to channel dissent back into the union apparatus and the Democratic Party.

As far as the contract goes, they have thrown in the towel in advance of any fight against the city.

The Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), politically associated with the Democratic Socialists of America, has nothing to say. The faction understands teachers want COLA, higher pay for paraprofessionals, adequate mental health treatment for teachers and students. But these demands do not go beyond sticky notes and white-board jottings at union-organized discussions. They appear nowhere in MORE's program or on its social media.

Other factions in the UFC sow confusion by calling for pressuring the union bureaucracy or the Democrats on the City Council, as if this is a viable solution to the deep-seated crisis of public education and the social rights of working people.

Further, the various opposition groups in UFC have all capitulated to the corporate-government propaganda that the pandemic is over. They never fought to close schools or lead job actions that would guarantee educators and student safety from the pandemic to begin with. Today, they regard the fight against COVID-19 as a closed chapter.

There is no way forward by appealing to the Democrats for reforms. They have shown what they are by their role in the pandemic, in the refusal to fight the far right, in the conduct of a proxy war against Russia and in austerity. Similarly, the entrenched bureaucracy of highly paid functionaries in the UFT cannot be persuaded or reformed. It must be abolished.

Educators need their own democratically controlled organizations to transfer power from the union apparatus to the rank and file.

The time to create them is now. The working class is on the move without the permission of the capitalist politicians. We are living through an upsurge of militancy by the working class around the world. Three million struck in France to defend pensions last month—just as the French government announced that it would supply tanks to the Ukrainian army. The working class in Britain is on the verge of a general strike to fight the strikebreaking laws of the Conservative Party, while NATO officials have called for a "military economy."

This past year has seen several significant struggles in New York City, including the 25-day strike by the New School part-time faculty and the only New York City nurses' strike in living memory.

As hundreds of thousands of city workers come up for their contracts, educators must learn from the lessons of recent struggles amid the pandemic. City workers, DOE teachers and support staff, as well as CUNY workers and transit workers, are in a powerful position to take the struggle for decent pay and better working conditions into their own hands.

*We educators must take the lead. We must help our brothers and sisters in DC37 to reject the sell-out tentative agreement and we must unite with CUNY workers and transit workers, both of whom face contract struggles.*

This requires that educators create new organizations which will direct a city-wide struggle. These committees must fight for political clarity among all workers about the nature of the struggle they face and who their class enemies are. This includes recognizing the fight of educators is an international one, and closely bound up with the struggle against imperialist war. Because of this, we in the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee are proud to stand in solidarity with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Our Committee, founded in August 2021 to fight the spread of COVID-19 in the schools, proposes a wide-ranging program of struggle.

- No contract, no work! Rank-and-file committees independent of the UFT bureaucracy must call on educators to take collective action to shut down the city's schools until a decent contract is reached and voted on by educators. Educators must reach out to other rank-and-file city workers for united action up to and including a city-wide general strike!
- Educators must carry the fight to other city workers and help DC37 workers reject their sellout contract!
- Eliminate COVID-19! This requires the full-scale mobilization of all public health measures available to eliminate the virus but must begin with action of educators in rank-and-file committees in school buildings to implement mitigation measures including mandatory masking, air filtration, testing and contact tracing!
- A 40 percent pay raise for in-service educators. Full restoration of medical benefits for retirees and current employees!
- A Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) to all wages and pensions.
- Rank-and-file oversight of all contract negotiations! Live stream all negotiation sessions!
- Hundreds of billions of dollars for education to be paid for by the expropriation of the billionaires!
- Immediately stop US supply of weapons and funds to Ukraine! Educators must play a central role in turning the youth to the working class and building a mass anti-war movement on an international basis!

To fight for this program, join the Educators Rank-and-file Safety Committee at wsws.org/edsafety.

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