

New York City teachers union prepares contract betrayal

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The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the organization that negotiates wages, benefits and working conditions with New York City for educators in the largest American school district, is presently putting the final touches on what most of its members understand will be a sellout that will include a real wage cut after inflation.

Educators have been working without a contract since September. Inflation has risen 6.45 percent in the last year, more for some types of food staples, and housing costs in the city and the surrounding area are at all-time highs.

The UFT is preparing to accept a pattern agreement based on the sellout imposed on city workers last month. The deal will accommodate sweeping cuts made to the city's Department of Education (DOE) by the right-wing mayor, Democrat Eric Adams, to the 2024 budget. Adams has called for a cut of \$652 million from city funding to the DOE. Another \$297 million will be cut as federal pandemic aid comes to an end.

The city has budgeted only enough funds for derisory 1 percent raises over four years for city workers. Anything above that, according to Adams' advisers, will have to be cut from other city services.

New York's city worker unions have embraced "pattern bargaining" over the years for the roughly 300,000 city workers. Generally, the first large union to sign a contract with the city determines a pattern for the others. In February, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 37 (DC37), which negotiates for tens of thousands of city administrative, parks, office, health care and other workers, accepted an agreement with the city that stipulates a below-inflation 3 percent annual raise. The contract was ratified early last month.

The UFT has kept a cordon of secrecy around the contract negotiations, requiring all members of its negotiation committee to sign non-disclosure agreements. There is, nevertheless, every indication that the UFT bureaucrats will refuse to contest a de facto wage cut.

In minutes of a recent UFT Executive Board meeting, published on the blog of the New Action group, a representative of the pro-DSA caucus Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) asked at a recent executive council meeting, in the mildest of tones, "... is there any chance we

could break that pattern? Members are always asking about wage increases and salary. Is that a given?"

This was answered by Carl Cambria, a UFT Manhattan Borough Representative, (whose job description includes lobbying elected officials): "So the likelihood of us breaking the pattern is very slim. Never happened in the city's history. Gone to arbitration and in other places, it's not broken. We're not gonna break the pattern. In terms of how high our wage increases will go, you can't expect them to go much higher than DC37."

The UFT policy of implementing the demands of the ruling class will come as no surprise to educators. The UFT bureaucracy was instrumental in reopening school buildings during the pandemic and promoting the lies of mayors Bill de Blasio and Eric Adams that the schools were the safest places in the city because test results showed constantly low COVID positivity rates.

As is well known among educators, this was the result of systematic under-testing of both students and staff. In fact, the schools were vectors of viral transmission and were responsible for the infection and death of staff, students and the broader community.

Today the Unity Caucus ruling faction—and for that matter, every single one of the loyal opposition groups in the union—behaves as if the pandemic were over. None of them calls for even limited COVID mitigations such as masking, social distancing and testing, measures that successive Democratic Party administrations have ended.

Yet another sign that educators can expect a rotten deal is the fact that the UFT's president, Michael Mulgrew, has taken the lead in saving New York City \$600 million annually by helping the Municipal Labor Committee (MLC), an umbrella organization of the bureaucracies of all the city unions, replace traditional Medicare benefits for city retirees with subpar, privatized health care known as Medicare Advantage, which requires pre-authorization and can deny retirees "medically necessary" care.

The surest sign that a betrayal is coming has been the uptick in activity by the bureaucratic apparatus. It has mobilized dozens, if not scores, of its hangers-on—with the assistance of MORE in demonstrations in front of school buildings as well as

“grade-ins” to demonstrate that teachers have onerous duties outside of the classroom, which of course they do. Its slogan is to decry “DOE decisions and the lack of educator autonomy.” This, however, is a diversion aimed at burying the issues of wages and medical benefits.

Many educators see through this dodge. When the UFT tweeted to its members, “What would make you feel truly appreciated as an educator?” educators responded with anger and called for pay raises, the defense of medical benefits and COVID protections. One educator replied, “A raise that acknowledges our work throughout the pandemic and after. A raise that at a minimum meets inflation. A raise that makes living and working in NYC affordable. Anything less than that shows we are not in fact appreciated.” Another wrote: “Not having our healthcare plan cut and getting a raise that competes with inflation.”

In response to a UFT tweet about a poll of teachers on contract issues, one educator commented, “How about more money that keeps up with inflation? Don’t sidetrack us with this bs.” Another echoed the same sentiments: “So you intentionally did not ask how we [are] feeling about our pay and healthcare?” A third commented, “We want more money, premium free benefits, and an end to observations. I don’t know why our union isn’t focused on these issues.”

The UFT’s parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has an unbroken record of betraying educators’ struggles. Earlier this month at Rutgers University, three unions affiliated with the AFT working closely with New Jersey’s Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, suddenly shut down a strike without any discussion from the membership, only reaching a tentative agreement this week.

In Los Angeles, the AFT affiliate, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), has reached an agreement with the Los Angeles Unified School District that will give a raise that barely keeps up with inflation coupled with vague pledges of a series of unenforceable staffing changes. It is notable that the DSA has played a significant role in suppressing the striving of educators to defend basic social rights in the city. UTLA is headed by DSA member Cecily Myart-Cruz, on one side of the negotiating table, and three DSA members of the school board on the other.

It is no wonder that the DSA supporters in the UFT faction MORE limit themselves to appeals to the reactionary Adams administration. “Mayor Adams and the City of New York need to stand up, do their part, and deliver the contract school workers deserve,” reads one of its recent calls for a rally.

“To fight back,” MORE tells educators, “... we need to follow the example of the retiree activists who demonstrated and forced the city council to oppose the change in their health care.” But it fails to mention that Democratic-dominated City Council did nothing to help the retirees and that the MLC went ahead and imposed the Medicare Advantage plan despite massive opposition from retired and in-service city workers.

And MORE is not alone in its surrender in advance. No faction of the loyal opposition in the UFT has plans to do anything but take a sellout lying down. The leader the New Action caucus says in his blog, “So yes, this [the forthcoming contract] will not be Los Angeles.” falsely implying that UTLA’s tentative agreement was some sort of victory—“Prepare for a paycut,” he tells workers, “but hopefully our organizing/negotiating efforts get us *somewhere* on working conditions.”

Prepare for a pay cut! Adams can be persuaded! The Democrats can pass adequate health care laws! This is the bankrupt program of every faction of the UFT leadership—each one is tied up with the interests of the Democratic Party—which in turn represents the billionaires.

Not only do these forces fail to prepare for a struggle against the contract. They fail to warn that Michael Mulgrew will seek to implement austerity on the backs of educators, students and their families. In fact, such a warning is suppressed by MORE, New Action and the other cynical and pessimistic pseudo-left groupings in the UFT.

It is especially noteworthy that not one of these groups has, in any public statement, tied the program of austerity to the launch by the United States of a proxy war with Russia in Ukraine. Indeed, no trace of anti-war sentiment, absolutely vital to the interests of workers around the globe and to New York educators, can be found in any statement published by these phony oppositional organizations.

The position of the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (NE ERFSC), a part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, is the opposite of this. The NE ERFSC bases itself on the independent interests of workers around the world. Indeed, the working class internationally is in revolt not only against capitalist governments seeking to impose austerity for the needs of war and rearmament, but also against the ossified trade union bureaucracies.

In March, the NE ERFSC made the following appeal to New York City educators: “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.”

These committees would formulate demands that meet the needs of educators and public education, not what the city says it can afford. Educators who want to fight for a decent contract should join immediately. No time can be lost in preparing a fight.



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