

New York City educators begin voting on sellout contract

Daniel de Vries**26 June 2023**

Voting has begun on the tentative agreement for approximately 115,000 New York City teachers and educational support staff, with balloting for most educators concluding by the last day of school on Tuesday. By calling a snap vote at the busy end of the school year, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has deliberately left educators with no time to study the details of the 38-page Memorandum of Agreement, the three side letters, and nine interim agreements that will become part of the contract if it passes.

What is clear from the deal the UFT struck last week is that educators would be worse off financially by the end of the contract, receiving raises of just 3 percent for the first three years, followed by 3.25 and 3.5 percent in the subsequent two years, respectively. In just the first year of the contract, which is retroactive to the last contract expiration in 2022, due to inflation educators will have taken a 3.5 percent pay cut in real terms.

The contract perpetuates poverty-level wages for many support staff, including paraprofessionals whose annual salary would range between \$32,000 and \$52,000 at the end of the contract term in 2026.

What the proposed contract omits is just as significant. Last week, New York City's Democratic mayor Eric Adams overrode objections from the City Comptroller to move forward with an attack on health care for retired teachers and other municipal workers, a consequence of vague commitments in the previous round of contracts for health care "savings." The backroom deals by the UFT and other city unions to eliminate the current public health care plan in favor of private Medicare Advantage coverage will save the city \$600 million a year while forcing retirees onto plans notorious for denying medically necessary procedures, overbilling, and fraud.

Also absent from the tentative agreement are provisions for

adequately funding schools, whose need has only grown as the devastating impact of the pandemic continues to loom large. In addition to rolling back anti-COVID mitigation measures, the city cut hundreds of millions of dollars from school budgets for the current school year, canceling arts programs, cutting back early childhood learning, and limiting summer program availability. The budget cuts prompted outrage from educators, parents, and students and triggered a political crisis as a majority of the City Council attempted to save face by belatedly denouncing the cuts they had voted to approve.

The attack on schools is intensifying again as Mayor Adams and the City Council are currently negotiating a budget for the new fiscal year beginning July 1. Adams has proposed approximately \$1 billion in further cuts to the Department of Education, part of a broader austerity program that will gut city services across the board.

By rushing through the contract ratification vote three days prior to the deadline for the city budget, the UFT bureaucracy is seeking to prevent the contract struggle from merging into a broader fight to defend public education and other social services. Indeed, from sabotaging retiree health care and rolling back pandemic protections to enforcing what will be a massive real wage cut, at every turn the UFT has carried out the directives of the Mayor's Office and the State House in Albany in opposition to the needs of educators and the student body of nearly one million.

Mayor Adams and Governor Hochul are acutely aware of the explosive social conditions that exist within New York City. The daily struggle by the working class to make ends meet in one of the most expensive cities in the world collides with the obscene wealth embodied on Wall Street. While the ruling class claims there is no money for schools, public transit, and other basic infrastructure, the corporate and financial elite continue to amass unfathomable fortunes. New York City alone is home to 58 billionaires and 724

centi-millionaires (wealth exceeding \$100 million), more than any other city in the world.

Like New York, school districts across the country, from New Jersey to Michigan to California, are slashing budgets and staff. The austerity squeeze at the state and local levels will intensify as the impact of growing federal cuts is felt. President Biden's recent deal with House Republicans on the debt ceiling will reclaim all unused pandemic funding, despite the ongoing health danger, and hold discretionary spending flat, effectively starving school districts struggling with increased costs. Meanwhile, unlimited funds are available to prop up the banking sector and to wage war against Russia in Ukraine.

Three years into the pandemic, with inflation continuing to drive down living standards for millions, social conditions are on a knife's edge. With the proposed five-year contract and snap vote, UFT President Michael Mulgrew and his band of bureaucrats in the union apparatus are seeking to stamp out a potential flash point of opposition among a section of workers who confront the impact of the social crisis on a daily basis.

This comes at a time when the struggles of the working class are increasing. In New York, 40,000 transit workers are resisting similar attempts to push through a new contract with 3 percent wage increases and attacks on retiree health care. Thousands of New York City school bus drivers authorized a strike by an overwhelming margin last week. Nationally, UPS workers and autoworkers are gearing up for historic contract struggles.

Among New York educators, there is no shortage of anger over the contract and the role of the UFT. Rachel, a middle school teacher, told the WSWS:

There is a lot of opposition to this deal, but I think that the UFT leadership will find a way to ram it through anyway. I do not trust Unity caucus, and I think that Michael Mulgrew should be in jail. The union is run like a criminal syndicate. As such, who can even think that they actually count members' votes? They're honestly lucky that I still even pay my dues. The whole union framework is corrupt, too. Randi Weingarten is a staple of the US government. It could barely be said that she's actually a teacher. She does not deal with what we do on a daily basis.

David, a retired history teacher, said, "This contract does not look good at all. The medical plan colludes with a private provider. The UFT has always been run as a dictatorship, albeit an allegedly democratic dictatorship. The hierarchy is very politically conservative. Unions, in general, have become weaker and weaker over the years."

Amanda, a second grade special education teacher, described the proposed UFT contract:

It is smoke and mirrors. They are saying there are no givebacks and putting out a lot of positivity, but nothing is being done about key issues of the work-life balance that we need. In reality, the compensation does not seem fair. At the end of the day, with the salary I get, I still need to do another job. I work for per session pay in a [Department of Education] after school program doing home instruction.

It is not clear if the contract will pass or not. In my school, it looks like some are really happy about the raises, mostly the older teachers. For the other half, they are not enough. The younger teachers are not understanding the union's contract and ask a lot of questions of other teachers. Some older teachers are saying, "It is sad about the contract, but what are you going to do? If it is pushed through, there is not much for us to do."

The Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Committee rejects the false notion put forward by the UFT bureaucracy that workers must accept this rotten deal because nothing better is possible. What is possible will be determined in struggle. The fact that the union officials are hostile to the interests of workers raises the need for the rank-and-file to take power back from the bureaucracy and organize independently.

Voting "No" is an important first step. To take the struggle forward, however, we urge workers to build rank-and-file committees at schools throughout the city and begin a real struggle for what educators and students need, not what Adams and Hochul say they can afford.



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