

“It just takes the weakest link in the chain to break the whole system”

New York City teacher speaks out following announcement of sellout contract ratification

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On July 10, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) announced ratification of a contract for 120,000 education workers in New York City covering the period 2022 through 2027.

The contract has widely been seen by educators as a step backward, particularly with its 3 percent annual raises that do not keep pace with inflation, which has averaged above 6 percent over the past year. The alleged “gains” of the deal, including the plan to expand the Department of Education’s (DOE) remote learning program, will provide only token relief to the tens of thousands of educators who have been told to fend for themselves throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. The contract makes no provision for remote learning in the event of an upsurge in student and adult infections from communicable diseases.

In addition to failing to meet the needs of classroom teachers, the 2022–2027 agreement does nothing to meaningfully alleviate the situation facing thousands of educational support staff, many of whom currently earn as little as \$26,000 per year in one of the world’s most expensive cities.

While the UFT touted the fact that the deal had been ratified by a margin of 75 percent, roughly just 60 percent of eligible members voted in favor of the contract; 40 percent either voted against it or did not vote at all. When voting began in late June, many educators voiced the suspicion that the union would deploy its arsenal of underhanded tactics to push through the rotten deal.

Voting on the contract, in fact, began only two weeks before the last day of the school year. In what is commonly understood by educators to be the busiest time of the year, the UFT exerted immense pressure on membership to vote based on a 38-page memorandum of

agreement (MOA), which few educators had time to read.

In a further refutation of claims by the UFT that the ratification represents a victory for union democracy, late last week saw the announcement that the Occupational Therapists/Physical Therapists (OT/PT) chapter, a separate bargaining unit of the UFT, also consisting of hundreds of workers including nurses, audiologists and medical supervisors, had rejected the contract by 1,129 to 782 votes—approximately 59 percent.

On average, employees in the OT/PT chapter earn far less than teachers, even though their educational and state certification requirements are largely the same, and even more demanding in some cases. The chapter similarly rejected the 2018 contract over the same concerns about pay, only accepting it once the union forced a revote.

The UFT bureaucracy has, according to some sources, discussed using similar tactics in response to the rejection of the current OT/PT agreement.

Charles, a New York City teacher of five years standing, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, voicing his support for the occupational and physical therapists and opposition to the contract deal more generally.

“I take solace in the fact that the OT/PTs are standing strong against the contract,” he said. “A lot of groups are not happy about this, and their voices are getting drowned out.

“I personally cannot believe that this agreement passed by as much of a majority as is being sold by Unity Caucus (the majority faction of the UFT led by President Michael Mulgrew). It was a rush job that was facilitated by Mulgrew and pushed by [Democratic Mayor Eric] Adams. But nobody really knew that they had the option to say no.

“Exhaustion was a huge factor in the ratification.

Employees who were new to the system voted yes because they simply didn't know any better." Referring to the years between 2007 and 2014, during which the Bloomberg administration and the UFT kept educators in the lurch for a protracted period while working on an expired contract, Charles said, "more experienced educators likely voted 'yes' out of fear of the 'Bloomberg Effect.'

"We're directed by our union leadership in many ways. And if they're telling us that our choices are between far right and center right, it automatically preempts the framework of the debate.

"It is very clear that there is more to this contract than the MOA let on. I've heard that there are up to 13 different contracts which are all negotiated separately. But we can't actually see any of the numbers, so we don't truly know what is going on."

Speaking on the situation facing substitute teachers and PF paraprofessionals, a highly exploited layer of DOE instructional support staff who work closely with teachers, often under dangerous and precarious conditions, Charles said the following:

"I don't understand how paras survive. They are so underpaid. And they deserve so much better. I can't help but wonder, if their vote on the contract had been tallied separately, would it still have passed?"

"As a teacher, I do feel very much unheard by this contract. But at the same time, I know I'll survive, financially. I'm very concerned about the paras, on the other hand. They cannot live below the poverty line. And since they don't have livable wages, our jobs become immensely harder. I've been in classrooms with paras who are only willing to do work that is commensurate with their pay scale, and it's really difficult. But I cannot ask them to do things that I myself wouldn't do for the same level of compensation.

"The substitute situation is really dire. There was a sub teacher shortage this year. And this led to a level of overwork that was not productive at all. At my school we had long-term subs [i.e., full-time teachers earning per-diem pay rates with no benefits], and that was largely unsuccessful, to say the least. It only created more of a burden on the whole pedagogical staff. Then, when you as a teacher are forced to cover for other teachers due to their absence or illness, even though you do get paid a little extra for it, the work that you end up putting off ends up increasing your own stress load by an incalculable amount."

Charles called for widespread unity between teachers,

paraprofessionals, therapists and other support staff in a joint struggle against the terms of the sellout contract, and conditions faced by educators more broadly.

"Since paras make so little compared with teachers, we're artificially pitted against one another. My hope is that some of the paras in the district will begin to take action. It just takes the weakest link in the chain to break the whole system. When it comes to striking, it has to be felt in order to make a difference. Paras have that ability and that opportunity. We need to be sticking together. We rely on each other too much."

Speaking against the broader attack that has been mounted on public education over the past several decades, Charles added:

"We as New Yorkers, and on the whole in this country, have been living under austerity measures for a long time. But there is no shortage of funds in New York City. The idea that we are now talking about making cuts to schools and accepting lesser contracts is an absolutely hysterical notion."

The WSWs urges educators to join and build the rank and file movement in New York City and beyond. The Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, a part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), aims to develop a political platform upon which educators can unite their struggles independently of both political parties of big business and all factions of the union bureaucracy. Get in touch with the IWA-RFC and take up the fight for the independence of the working class.



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