

New York City public school therapists accept concessions contract on second vote forced by union

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On Wednesday, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the organization that claims to represent the interests of 120,000 education workers in New York City, announced that occupational and physical therapists (OT/PTs) who work for New York City's Department of Education (DOE) had accepted a sellout contract by a margin of about 75 percent.

The DOE's approximately 2,900 school therapists, whose number also includes nurses and audiologists, provide special education students with services related to their federally mandated Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and work to foster basic proficiencies that are essential both in and outside of the classroom. These include fine- and large-motor skills, physical and sensory coordination, mobility, balance, as well as cognitive functions. OT/PTs work closely with teachers, school staff and medical professionals to develop and implement care plans for students.

The bureaucratic apparatus of the UFT had forced the OP/PTs, who constitute a separate bargaining unit in the UFT, to vote a second time on the contract they had rejected in June. The 2022-2027 contract with the administration of right-wing Democratic mayor Eric Adams, contained major concessions from educators, including pay raises—de facto pay cuts—that came nowhere close to meeting the inflation levels of the past year and a half.

Falling in line with the Biden administration's narrative that the coronavirus pandemic is a thing of the past, the UFT's contract failed to even mention COVID-19 at all and gave educators no influence over school building closings or remote work in case of the spread of disease. The contract was approved by teachers, paraprofessionals, social workers, and other education workers in June, though only after widespread opposition.

Since voting on the contract began in mid-June, leading members of the OT/PT chapter had taken to social media and local news to speak against the agreement. The issue of pay parity with teachers is of broad concern, with therapists earning on average \$15,000 less annually than their teacher counterparts while their educational requirements are largely the same.

The defiance of the OT/PTs resonated with thousands of teachers and especially with paraprofessionals, who continue to be paid poverty wages. The contract, pushed through in a snap vote with only two weeks left in the school year after nine months of negotiations, was ratified largely because DOE educators also saw no other alternative.

George, a Brooklyn teacher, said to the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I voted 'no' on this contract, and I have been inspired by the courageousness of the OT/PTs in rejecting it as well. I stand in solidarity with them. Should they choose to vote 'no' again on their revote, I will support them, and I hope that many others support them as well."

The response of the UFT to the rejection was to repeat the antidemocratic tactics it employed after a similar "no" vote of its 2018 contract by OT/PTs: politically isolate dissenting members and force a re-vote until the chapter "gets it right."

In early August, UFT president Michael Mulgrew announced that the OT/PT chapter would be divided along lines corresponding to those who voted for and against the contract, with those voting "no" being given the opportunity to re-submit their vote. The OT/PTs would not receive the agreement's meager retroactive payouts that would have otherwise been available.

"The OT/PT chapter will now stand alone and, as a result, the situation has changed significantly. We now feel strongly about having a revote only for your chapter ... Please note that the result of your chapter's revote—no matter the outcome—will be final," Mulgrew wrote in an email to the chapter.

The UFT did everything it could to isolate the therapists and pressure them into surrendering and the OP/PTs no doubt approved the contract on the second vote because they felt the union was adamantly opposed to improving their living standards and would only sabotage any struggle.

The leader of the OT/PT chapter, Melissa Williams, resigned her position earlier in August noting in a statement: "The game is rigged. It was rigged for two years. We are only now seeing the full force of the abuse of power in a union with one-party rule," referring to the domination of the UFT by President Michael Mulgrew's Unity Caucus. Williams herself is

associated with the opposition Movement of Rank-and-File Educators, (MORE), a caucus in the UFT associated with the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA). Several other members of the unit's leadership have also resigned.

The notion that the UFT bureaucracy functions as a dictatorship over rank and file educators is an entirely valid sentiment, and it is one that is widely held by educators.

The UFT's deep-seated hostility to democracy, however, does not stem from the individual shortcomings of its various functionaries, including Michael Mulgrew. Rather, it is a political product of its total subservience to the framework of American capitalism in general and the Democratic Party in particular. Appeals to the "good faith" responsibilities of Mulgrew and the Unity Caucus, as some opposition groups in the UFT have made, are themselves bankrupt. A change of faces—or even slightly more militant rhetoric—at the top of the UFT would not alter its basic function as a political prison for tens of thousands of education workers in New York.

Randi Weingarten, former head of the UFT and currently president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the UFT's parent organization, sits on the Democratic National Committee. She operates as a key partner in the planning and execution of US domestic and foreign policy. She has been instrumental in the sellout of educators' struggles across the country and has served US imperialism in its interests abroad, particularly by fomenting the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

On Tuesday August 15, *Jacobin* magazine, the unofficial organ of the DSA, published an article entitled "The United Federation of Teachers Isn't Fighting Back Hard Enough." The author, MORE supporter and UFT-delegate Andrew Worthington, criticized the UFT's leadership and cynically lauded the role of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) by comparison.

"This lack of democracy is precisely a symptom of the weakness of the UFT in comparison to robust, member-engaged rank-and-file memberships in LA, Chicago, Oakland, and elsewhere," Worthington writes.

He evades, however, any discussion of the massive betrayals that were aided and abetted by these pro-DSA union-reform factions. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the role of the DSA-aligned Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in the teacher strike in Chicago in 2012, the outcome of which was the shuttering of dozens of schools, the extra-contractual mass firing of educators, and a dramatic reduction in the quality of education for thousands of working class student in the city. The MORE caucus is modeled on the CTU's CORE.

In Los Angeles, the DSA-led UTLA, in collaboration with the school board, which included two DSA-backed members, oversaw the ratification of a sellout contract for 30,000 educators. Both the DSA-led CTU and UTLA were instrumental in forcing students, teachers and staff back into

unsafe schools in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, acquiescing to the demand of Biden Administration and thousands of state and municipal governments across the US, that businesses and schools must remain open no matter the costs in human life.

Worthington's support for a host of discredited union reform movements is a part and parcel of the DSA's broader political strategy of channeling opposition to capitalism back into the Democratic Party.

This was made no more clearer than at the DSA convention in August, where the organization resolved to continue to provide a left facade for its support for Democratic politicians who carry out attacks on the working class at home and wars abroad no less ruthlessly than their Republican collaborators.

New York City educators must place no confidence in any of the factions of the UFT which attempt to reform the bureaucratic union apparatus. Under conditions in which the political establishment is demanding austerity from the working class to fund the imperialist wars in Ukraine against Russia, as well as an impending war against China, only organizations of educators independent of both parties of big business can lead struggles to victory.

Educators must build independent organizations to advance demands that correspond to their needs, not to what the capitalist establishment and its partners in the union bureaucracies deem acceptable.

We urge OT/PTs and New York City educators in general to join the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (NERFSC) part of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committee, an international network of workers organizations which is independent of capitalist parties and their servants in the trade unions. Educators who wish to build NERFSC should sign up immediately and subscribe to the *World Socialist Web Site* Educators Newsletter.



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