

New York City teachers union abandons plan for retiree healthcare reform, but educators still face union complicity in attacks on education

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Following mass opposition and legal challenges, the bureaucracy of New York City's teachers union has withdrawn its support for a plan for sweeping attacks on healthcare.

For the past three years, the city government, with the support of the United Federation of Teachers and the majority of 101 other public sector unions in the Municipal Labor Committee (MLC), has sought to privatize the healthcare of around 250,000 retired city employees. The move would push them onto an inferior Medicare Advantage plan (MAP) managed by a private insurer, Aetna.

The move was first floated in July of 2021, claiming it would save the city, the center of world finance with the most billionaires in the world, hundreds of millions of dollars per year. After facing widespread opposition, an alternate plan was discussed which would also gut the healthcare of active city workers, which was also met with overwhelming hostility by workers.

The move would inevitably increase pre-authorization requirements for essential medical services. Many healthcare providers also do not accept Medicare Advantage plans.

From the beginning, the austerity measure hinged on key support from the city's union bureaucracy in the UFT, AFSCME District 37, Sanitation Workers Teamsters Local 831 and other major city unions.

The UFT's official withdrawal of support was announced last month by president Michael Mulgrew, who is also executive co-chair of the MLC. The union no doubt intends it to be received among workers as their having listened to rank-and-file opposition. In a letter dated June 23, Mulgrew said of the city's Democratic Mayor Eric Adams, "It has become apparent that this administration is more interested in cutting its costs than honestly working with us to provide high-quality health care to city workers."

This is staggering hypocrisy, given the fact that Mulgrew

and the MLC have been leading advocates of the healthcare austerity plan from the beginning, working with both the ex-cop Adams and his predecessor Bill de Blasio.

In fact, the withdrawal of support commits the union to little. The MAP proposal was already on life support, following a series of lawsuits brought by retiree organizations, which are currently being appealed by the Adams administration.

While the measures were supported by the overwhelming majority of the city's union bureaucrats, they were deeply unpopular among retirees and active workers. Tens of thousands of retirees within the MLC donated money to lawsuits against the move.

The apparent end of this particular plan is no cause for complacency by teachers and other city workers. There can be no doubt that similarly massive austerity measures are being worked out jointly between the MLC and the Adams administration. This is because the orientation of the bureaucracy is determined, not by rank-and-file pressure, but by the needs and demands of US capitalism.

The MAP is only part of a nationwide assault on public education, which is accelerating this year due to a "fiscal cliff" created by the withdrawal of COVID funding by the Biden Administration. While schools are being starved of funds, both parties are backing record spending on the US war machine, which topped \$850 billion in the latest national budget.

Major cuts are already underway, both in smaller districts such as Flint and Ann Arbor, Michigan, as well as major urban districts such as San Diego, Los Angeles and Detroit .

In Chicago, the city is seeking to close a \$400 million deficit in contract talks this summer.

To fight these cuts, teachers must organize a rank-and-file rebellion across the country, building committees of action at every major school district and coordinating joint action in

defense of the right to public education.

This requires a fight against the teachers union bureaucrats, who are closing ranks with Democratic Party-controlled city administrations to impose these cuts. In Chicago, mayor Brandon Johnson is even an ex-union staffer, who, predicting school cuts during his election campaign, said, “Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?”

On a national level, the teachers unions are key backers of the Democrats and the pro-war Biden White House. American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten, who began her career as a union official in the UFT, is also a member of the Democratic National Committee and crisscrosses the globe promoting US-backed wars from Ukraine to the Middle East. While promoting neo-Nazi forces in Ukraine as defenders of “democracy” against Russia, she has joined the slanders against students and educators protesting the Gaza genocide as “antisemites.”

Weingarten, together with the AFT as a whole, also played a key role in overriding the opposition of teachers and parents to the forced reopening of schools during the height of the pandemic in 2021 and 2022. This cost countless lives but was considered necessary by Wall Street to get parents back to work.

New York City teachers sought to register their opposition to the UFT’s betrayals by voting for opposition candidates in recent union elections. On June 13, the Unity Caucus, the UFT’s long-time dominant faction, lost the leadership election of the union’s Retired Teacher Chapter (RTC) by a significant margin.

The Retiree Advocate slate (RA), a faction within the union led by recently elected RTC president Bennett Fischer, unseated the Unity Caucus by over 7,000 votes. Unity was also unseated in the election for the chapter representing paraprofessionals by the “Fix Para Pay” slate, another oppositional UFT faction.

But teachers will not find in these “reform” groups, which function as a loyal opposition inside the bureaucracy, a means to organize a fight against sellouts. These factions are seeking to create a similar framework as in Chicago, where the “reform” Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators has controlled the Chicago Teachers Union for more than a decade, helping to impose massive cuts.

On June 18, Mulgrew and Randi Weingarten attended a monthly membership meeting of the RTC, where they stumped for the re-election of Biden. Revealing perhaps more than he intended, Mulgrew stated, “This chapter is the muscle” in the campaign for Biden.

Weingarten urged retirees to support Biden’s reelection campaign and attempted to channel their anger by cynically exulting the opposition to MAP, stating, “[t]here is a lot of

fear over Medicare. This message will be respected.”

Fischer made no attempt to criticize or distance himself against this in the meeting, effectively endorsing it by his silence.

In a follow-up to the June 18 meeting on the RA website, Fischer concluded a memo with an appeal to Mulgrew to work with the very same Democrats behind the attack on the benefits of workers. “We call on UFT President Michael Mulgrew to support legislation in the NY City Council, and in Albany, to protect our Medicare & Supplemental health benefits on both the city and State levels,” he wrote.

The two-party system, which the bureaucracy has promoted for decades, is now in deep crisis, with both Democrats and Republicans deeply hated by working people and Biden’s reelection on the verge of collapse due to his advanced senility. The bureaucrats have worked to shield the Democrats in particular from mass outrage over Biden’s role in the genocide in Gaza, as well as the role of Democratic and Republican officials at the state and local level in mass arrests against protesters.

But from the UFT to other unions across the country, the bureaucracy itself is also in crisis, as anger continues to mount over sellouts and their close ties to the hated corporate parties. Recently, a federal judge ruled in favor of a lawsuit by Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker who ran for president of the United Auto Workers in 2022, effectively confirming that “reform” president Shawn Fain was “elected” on the basis of massive vote suppression. Now, autoworkers are pushing for new elections, controlled by the rank and file.

A rebellion by workers is needed to seize control out of the hands of these pro-corporate officials. Rather than wasting time and energy fruitlessly trying to reform the apparatus from the inside, the bureaucracy must be smashed and replaced with new democratic structures, rank-and-file committees, actually controlled by workers themselves.

Regardless of who controls the UFT, workers are faced with the need to build a powerful movement, not just in New York City but around the world, fighting for hundreds of billions of dollars wasted on Wall Street and war to be used for public education and other critical social needs.



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