

National Education Association shuts down annual convention, locks out striking staffers

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Last Friday, the National Education Association (NEA) abruptly cancelled its annual convention, scheduled for July 4-7, after just one day of official proceedings in Philadelphia. The shutdown of the Representative Assembly (RA) was in response to a strike by the union representing NEA staffers, the National Education Association Staff Organization (NEASO).

Timing a three-day strike for the convention, NEA staffers based at the union's Washington D.C. headquarters greeted delegates arriving at the Philadelphia Convention Center with picket lines. The NEASO contract expired May 31 and the staffers' union staged the walkout as an unfair labor practices action.

The NEA informed the media it made the decision to terminate the RA, at the cost of \$12 million, because delegates would not cross the staffers' picket line. It said the main business of the convention—New Business Items (NBIs) that are submitted by locals requiring at least 50 endorsers each—would not be debated but would be voted on at an undisclosed date. The vote would be held online.

The abrupt shutdown of the RA meant the cancellation of a planned address by keynote speaker President Joe Biden. Following his disastrous debate performance on June 27, Biden had decided to speak at the convention in place of the previously scheduled speaker, his wife Jill, in the hopes that a friendly labor crowd would help his flailing campaign. Biden, who notoriously outlawed a strike by railroad workers in 2022, declared that he wouldn't cross a picket line. He spoke instead to a much smaller crowd at a nearby church.

Members of Educators for Palestine and other anti-war educators had also rallied at the Convention prior to the shutdown, urging union members to support pro-Palestinian NBIs. Locals submitted calls for digital communication tools to “educate members on the Nakba” [the violent ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by the US-backed Zionist regime in 1947-48], for the union to defend educators' and students' speech “in defense of Palestine,” and for the NEA to hold a “secret ballot vote to rescind its endorsement of President

Joe Biden until he stops funding the Israeli military, decries Israel's war crimes, and brings about an immediate cease-fire in Gaza.”

The termination of the RA underscores the fact that the nation's largest union, with nearly three million members, is in enormous crisis, alongside that of Biden and the Democratic Party. It is also clear that those running the event, billed by the union as the “largest democratic deliberative assembly in the world,” were not only hostile to, but fearful of, actual democratic input by the members.

The NEASO strike was met with vindictive hostility by the NEA decision-makers, even though most of the striking union members are union reps on the lower rung of the NEA apparatus. The NEA bureaucracy immediately canceled the return flights and accommodations of strikers and locked them out from pay and work indefinitely “until an agreement is reached.” The NEA also canceled staff health benefits, effective July 31.

The NEASO has about 350 members and is mainly comprised of lower-level bureaucrats and administrative staff, many of whom “assist in negotiations” or perform “analysis.” NEASO members average \$124,000 annually, nearly three times the average wages of a teacher, but far below the top tier of union bureaucrats. Current NEA President Becky Pringle netted \$495,787 during the 2022-2023 fiscal year, up by \$64,000 from the prior year.

If Pringle and the NEA hierarchy treat their subordinates in the NEASO with such viciousness, what must be their attitude towards the millions of educators who are looking for a way to fight against austerity, layoffs and budget cuts? Teachers everywhere—subsisting on poverty pay in overstuffed classrooms with few resources—know the answer.

The NEASO walkout is the first against the parent union since 1971. Many staffers have been on a wage freeze for a decade. The anger of NEASO members was palpable on social media, with many shocked that the NEA preferred to shut down the convention rather than meet their demands.

Strikers decried the “waste of millions of members' dues

to the NEA.” “How does a union get to the point where its employees go on strike? I have serious concerns,” posted another. “I will NEVER pay into this pyramid scheme ‘cause that’s what I believe the NEA is!! Where do the dues go?!” demanded one member. Another wrote, “The nation’s largest union is acting like a corporation.”

As far as the union apparatus was concerned, the truncated convention was now down to its essential purpose—getting out the vote for Biden and the Democrats.

Adopting the lackluster motto, “We must keep going,” Pringle [was she referring to Biden or the union?] claimed:

During his term in office, Biden has made huge financial investments in public education, pushed the effort to relieve educator debt, and made strides toward safer communities and schools for children across the country.

She concluded, gushing:

Biden, Harris, and First Lady Jill Biden—an educator and NEA member—have also worked tirelessly to amplify educator voices.

In reality, Biden is currently presiding over the ending of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding, which is projected to cost 364,000 educators their jobs, and result in widespread school closures and the destruction of educational programs nationwide. Defunding of public schools is accelerating, despite the “amplification” of educators’ voices in protests and resistance.

Educators have also not forgotten the role of Biden and First Lady Jill Biden, together with Pringle and American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, in “working tirelessly” to force the unsafe reopening of schools as COVID-19 ravaged educators, students and parents alike.

The role of the NEA has been to keep districts isolated one from another while it negotiated contract betrayals and imposed round after round of budget cuts. Presently it is helping impose Biden’s catastrophic “fiscal cliff” across the country. The union bureaucrats have worked overtime this election year to contain opposition among teachers in the service of the Democrats, upon whom the bureaucracy relies to ensure their dues stream.

For years, the NEA has bureaucratically crushed dissent and curated the resolutions generated by locals, selecting

those that were acceptable to bring to the floor. But the summary shutdown this year enabled the bureaucracy to entirely quash discussion. Delegates voted on fewer than 10 of about 115 New Business Items that were submitted. The rest will be disposed of by the board of directors, including those that called for opposition to genocide.

Significantly, one of the only six business items deliberated and passed by delegates established plans for new resources to distract workers while deepening the corporatist relationship of the union with district administrators. The measure allocates \$51,000 to establish a local, state and national network on “strike and action readiness.” This Orwellian proposal has nothing to do with preparing for strikes and everything to do with phony “actions” to distract teachers from the behind-the-scenes betrayals for which the NEA is notorious.

Specifically, the NEA recommends creating Contract Action Teams (CAT) that function as lower-level bureaucrats interacting with the rank-and-file and providing information from the higher-ups, organizing various petitions, running local candidates for office, organizing “signage” and community/public relations. Parenthetically, the NEA admits the real end game, noting that “the best way to *prevent a strike* is to prepare for one” [emphasis added].

The abortive RA of 2024 is symbolic of the dead end of appeals to the NEA bureaucracy. This apparatus operates to enforce austerity and block political opposition to war.

What is necessary is the building of a powerful movement of educators and workers from below, to unite the struggles that are developing among educators across the US and around the world. The National Educators Rank-and-File Committee mobilizes the working class independently of both political parties and the capitalist system they uphold. Get involved today!



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