

New York City educators union purges oppositionists on staff

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Last week, the leadership of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City purged six members of its staff who were associated with the opposition to the ruling Unity Caucus in the UFT election in May.

Among those removed was Amy Arundell, who sought to unseat President Michael Mulgrew on the A Better Contract (ABC) slate. She was fired from a staff position at 52 Broadway, the union headquarters near Wall Street, without any advance notice.

Previously, the UFT leadership had removed her as Queens Borough Representative, a post she had held since 2017, in October 2023, due to her opposition to the Gaza genocide. Arundell was harassed during the election campaign, with photographs of her and a lewd statement placed in urinals at the union headquarters.

Another terminated staffer was Migda Rodriguez, who was elected First Vice Chair of the UFT's paraprofessional chapter. A founder of the Fix Para Pay opposition group and a candidate for UFT Executive Board on the ABC slate, she told the media, referring to Mulgrew and the Unity Caucus: "It's retaliation to the fullest. It's wrong."

All the fired bureaucrats will return to teaching positions in schools.

These actions express the essentially dictatorial character of the trade union bureaucracy. The repressive and thuggish actions are not merely an act of retaliation against individual officials but an attack on the democratic rights of teachers who chose to vote for them.

These methods flow from the bureaucracy's social interests and function as an instrument of the Democratic Party and corporate America. The bureaucracy depends on its ties to the political establishment and suppresses opposition not because it is strong, but because it is politically bankrupt.

Educators, like millions of workers and young people, are moving to the left in response to war, genocide, mass poverty and the ongoing drive by the Trump administration to destroy democratic rights. The union apparatus is determined to stamp out even the most limited opportunities for workers to express their opposition to the status quo.

Last month's "No Kings" protests mobilized as many as 11 million people against genocide and dictatorship. Workers are

confronting massive budget cuts in every major city, carried out by Democrats, including at the MTA and in New York's public schools, both of which face multibillion-dollar deficits.

This is bringing workers into inevitable conflict with the union apparatus as a whole. In Philadelphia, the union shut down a powerful city workers' strike with a contract almost identical to the city's initial offer. The path forward requires the development of new organs of workers' power—rank-and-file committees—to break through the bureaucratic straitjacket and mobilize workers independently.

The vote and its aftermath have parallels to broader developments in the city. Among city educators, there is widespread support for Zohran Mamdani, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) mayoral candidate who has criticized the Gaza genocide and promised modest reforms. Many of those who voted for him in the Democratic primary saw him as an opponent of the political establishment, including both the Democratic Party leadership and Donald Trump.

The UFT bureaucracy declined to endorse a candidate in the Democratic Party primary, although it has since endorsed Mamdani in the general election. The UFT bureaucracy has the closest ties not just to the Democrats but to the highest levels of the party's establishment.

This is personified by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten, who initially rose to power as head of the UFT. Until recently, a member of the Democratic National Committee and a close ally of the Clinton family, Weingarten is a staunch Zionist who travels the world on behalf of the State Department to promote the wars of US imperialism. A key figure in the forced reopening of schools during the height of the pandemic, she also has ties to anti-vaxxers and other extreme right figures around Trump.

The hysteria in the corporate media and both political parties over Mamdani's primary victory mirrors the gangster methods of the UFT. The Democrats have slandered him as antisemitic, while Trump has whipped up a lynch-mob atmosphere, threatening to arrest and deport him if he wins the mayoralty.

The UFT election

The UFT elections took place during the mayoral primary campaign. Both votes expressed widespread anger and dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party establishment, albeit within the narrow confines of official politics.

Mulgrew, who has been UFT president since 2009, won 54 percent of the vote. The ABC caucus, led by Arundell, won 32 percent, and the Alliance of Retired and In-Service Educators (ARISE), led by middle-school art teacher Olivia Swisher, won 14 percent.

Out of 201,791 ballots, only 58,318 were returned, a turnout of less than 30 percent—typical for American union elections. The mass abstention reflects that most educators felt unrepresented by any of the three tickets, and many rightly see attempts to “reform” the UFT as futile.

Even so, turnout increased by 15 percent compared to 2022. Mulgrew’s share fell by 12 points from his 66 percent showing that year. Among high school teachers, a majority backed the opposition: ARISE won 34 percent, ABC 28 percent, and Unity just 38 percent.

The opposition vote reflects, in a highly limited form, deep anger over conditions in the schools. These include: the UFT’s role in reopening schools during the pandemic, resulting in the deaths of children and staff; its refusal to enforce the state’s class-size reduction law; continued poverty wages for paraprofessionals; refusal to fight for pay equity for therapists, nurses and audiologists; and its complicity in Adams’s right-wing agenda, including immigrant raids, austerity and censorship of criticism of Israel.

The UFT leadership also played a leading role in the drive by the Municipal Labor Committee to throw city retirees onto Medicare Advantage plans in order to save the city money. It has collaborated in the smearing and doxxing of educators who spoke out against the Israeli state, and stood silent in the face of political censorship by the city’s Schools Chancellor.

Dead end of “reform”

The fight to defend public education and social programs, especially in New York, the center of world finance, requires the expropriation of the financial oligarchy, which dominates society and is the social base of the move toward dictatorship.

But the opposition slates offered no fundamental alternative to the UFT bureaucracy. While both ABC and ARISE opposed privatization and called for higher wages, they offered no explanation of the causes of these attacks or any path to defeat them. Social issues were relegated to contract negotiations or appeals to the Democratic Party.

ABC called for “a reckoning” with pandemic-era decisions, but did not say whether that meant protections from future infections, or how such a demand could be enforced. Their statement on due process could be read as a reference to free speech on Gaza, but it makes no challenge to the censorship being imposed by both the Adams and Trump administrations.

ARISE raised pay equity and job protections for school workers and called for internal reforms to the union structure. Its platform advanced social-democratic slogans promoted by the DSA—student debt relief, child care subsidies, immigrant protections—but offered no means to win them. Swisher supported United Auto Workers (UAW) president Shawn Fain’s cynical pledge for a “general strike in 2028,” a publicity stunt that has no connection to a real strategy.

Fain sold out an auto strike in 2023 and is helping the companies lay off thousands and cover up deaths, such as Ronald Adams, who died at a Michigan plant in April. While Fain had close ties with the Biden White House, since the presidential election, he has openly embraced Trump and his “America First” nationalism. In both administrations, he offered, and is offering, the union’s services in preparing a war economy.

In New York, both slates have praised the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), whose ruling Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) is promoted by the pseudo-left. But the CTU just imposed a new sellout contract, paving the way for layoffs and school closures.

In other words, were ABC or ARISE to assume power in the UFT, they would carry out the same fundamental policies as the current bureaucracy.

Workers cannot pressure existing structures to the left. The purge of opposition figures in the UFT demonstrates that the bureaucracy cannot be reformed—it must be abolished. Rank-and-file committees must be built in every school and district to return power to the workers themselves and to fight for real control over education.

This is part of a broader struggle by the working class against the entire political establishment and the capitalist system. The educators’ fight is inseparable from the struggle of all workers against dictatorship, austerity, war, and genocide. UFT members who want to take up this fight should contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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