

State authorities revoke labor contract for 15,000 Philadelphia teachers

By Jerry White and Samuel Davidson
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In a meeting held virtually without any public notice and no public testimony, the five-member School Reform Commission overseeing the Philadelphia public school system in the US state of Pennsylvania voted unanimously Monday morning to revoke a labor agreement covering 15,000 teachers.

The move, which has the backing of the Republican-controlled state government in Harrisburg and the local Democratic Party establishment in Philadelphia, clears the way for authorities to unilaterally impose deep health care cuts for current and retired instructors and accelerate the dismantling of public education in the nation's 14th largest school district.

The move has been prepared with a nonstop propaganda campaign blaming teachers' salaries, health care benefits and pensions for the lack of school funding. Announcing the plans, Superintendent William Hite said, "If we don't find additional savings, our children will continue to face inadequate resources." Hite cynically claimed that the money squeezed from teachers would be used for reading assistance and student counseling services, art materials and other school supplies.

Under the plan, the school district will impose up to 13 percent of the cost of medical premiums on teachers and other school employees who are members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers starting on December 15. Most PFT members who presently pay no health premiums will now have to spend up to \$200 per month for family coverage. They will also have their choice of plans limited.

The district will stop paying an annual contribution of \$4,352 per member into the union's Health and Welfare Fund, which provides prescription, dental, vision and other benefits to active members and

retirees. The SRC will take over health care provision for current teachers and end all contributions for retirees. The latter, already barely surviving on fixed incomes, will likely be dumped into Medicare or Obama's health care exchanges where they will be forced to pay high out-of-pocket costs for inferior coverage.

The crisis facing school districts throughout the US is not the product of the supposedly unsustainable cost of health and pension plans. On the contrary, it is the result of the steep decline in tax revenues due to the economic crisis, combined with the starving of school districts through cuts in federal and state funding. Throughout the US, per-pupil spending remains lower than pre-2008 levels.

This assault on public education is a bipartisan policy. In 2011, Pennsylvania's Republican Governor Tom Corbett cut state funding for public education by nearly \$1 billion. The Philadelphia school district lost \$250 million, or \$1,300 per student.

On the federal level, the Obama administration has exploited the precarious condition of state and local governments to promote the expansion of for-profit charter schools, test-based evaluations, merit pay and other anti-teacher measures.

Philadelphia's school crisis has been exacerbated by the decision of the Obama administration to reject the district's application for Race to the Top federal grant money because it did not move swiftly enough to implement pro-business "school reform" measures. The funding would have added tens of millions of dollars to the district's budget, or approximately \$750 per student.

It is significant that the attack by the School Reform Commission has reportedly freed up \$10 million in federal funding from the Obama administration—that is,

the federal government is incentivizing the assault on teachers.

Since 2011, Philadelphia has closed dozens of schools and wiped out over 4,000 jobs, or about 25 percent of school staff. Courses have been cut and class sizes have grown. Teachers, who have suffered through a wage freeze, regularly pay out of their own pockets for paper, pencils and other teaching materials. More than a third of the district's schools—86 out of 214—are now charters, which are attended by 61,000 out of the district's 131,000 students.

The School Reform Commission was established in December 2001 when Republican Governor Mark Schweiker put Philadelphia schools under state control. Currently, Governor Corbett appoints three members, and the Philadelphia mayor, Democrat Michael Nutter, appoints two.

In January of this year, Corbett appointed Democratic City Council member William Green to chair the School Reform Commission. Green is a former corporate lawyer and international bond trader whose father was a US congressman and former mayor of Philadelphia. He is a right-wing proponent of school vouchers and of transforming the entire district into charter schools, as has happened in New Orleans.

Since taking over the body, Green has made it clear that he plans to impose a unilateral contract on the teachers' union if a negotiated settlement cannot be reached. Talks with the PFT have continued for 21 months with no deal.

In the face of this, the PFT and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, have repeatedly offered to impose millions of dollars in health care and other concessions on their members. In response to the SRC decision, the PFT said that its only response would be to go to court, primarily to protect its control over the union's multimillion-dollar health and welfare fund.

In a Twitter post, AFT President Randi Weingarten warned that unilateral action by state authorities might provoke opposition from teachers that the union executives could not control. Asserting that the union was the "glue holding Philadelphia's schools together," Weingarten said Corbett and Green were "recklessly" trying to "provoke a strike."

Over the last six years of the Obama administration, the AFT and its state and local affiliates have gone

from city to city to put out fires and suppress the opposition of teachers, parents and students to the shutdown of hundreds of public schools and other attacks on education. This included the sabotage of the 2012 strike by 30,000 Chicago teachers against Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff.

Predictably Weingarten told Philadelphia teachers to "elect a new governor who believes in education and is willing to take responsibility," a reference to Corbett's Democratic challenger, Tom Wolf, in next month's gubernatorial election. In fact, Wolf, a multimillionaire, is as much a tool of corporate and financial interests attacking public education as his Republican counterpart.

The attack on Philadelphia teachers takes place under conditions of a concerted drive by politicians from both big-business parties to destroy pensions and other social rights of the working class in order to channel even more money into the banks. Last week, a federal judge overseeing the Stockton, California case ruled that the city could rip up pensions without the slightest regard to the state constitution, which explicitly prohibits the "impairment" of public employee retiree benefits.

This follows a similar ruling in the Detroit bankruptcy case, which has been used to rip up pensions and health care benefits of city workers and carry out the wholesale privatization of public services and assets.

In every case, the entire political establishment—from the Democrats and Republicans, to the unions and the media—insist that there is no money for pensions, public education and other essential services. Meanwhile, trillions are poured into the financial markets and the Pentagon war machine.

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