

Teachers strike in Burlington, Vermont over health care cuts, working conditions

Jerry White
15 September 2017

More than 400 teachers walked out on strike in Burlington, Vermont Thursday, after last-minute efforts by a mediator, the city's Democratic mayor and the Burlington Education Association (BEA) failed to prevent the strike. The walkout, which teachers authorized with a 95 percent vote last week, is the first since 1978 in Vermont's largest school district, which serves 4,000 students.

For the second year in a row the school board unilaterally imposed a contract on teachers when their previous agreement expired on August 31. Teachers will be subjected to sharply higher out-of-pocket health care costs, including a \$1,200 deductible, a miserly pay increase that will keep teachers in the bottom third of county earners, and added duties that would reduce teacher prep time and their ability to meet individually with students.

Teachers say programming cuts and unilateral workplace changes have led to the unprecedented resignation or forced retirement of more than 100 educators over the last 27 months. In a widely-publicized resignation letter obtained by the *Burlington Free Press*, Edgar Murray, a special education teacher with 35 years' experience, called the district's cost-cutting changes "illogical and irresponsible," pointing to the dumping of 27 students with a variety of social, emotional and behavioral needs in a cafeteria with limited supervision alongside 300 high school kids enrolled in standard curriculum. The move, to save the district \$130,000 a year, was also cited by four other teachers who left the district.

Responding to the resignations, Superintendent Yaw Obeng said, "They left. It's great they have that opportunity, but that doesn't change our focus."

Like school officials around the country, Burlington authorities are restructuring operations in lockstep with

sweeping federal and state budget cuts and the profit-driven "school reform" policies championed by Democrats and Republicans alike over the last quarter century.

Under the bipartisan budget deal worked out between the state legislature in Montpelier and Republican Governor Phil Scott, school districts around the state must cut \$13 million from their budget over the next two years, including \$3 million in Burlington area schools. This follows tens of millions in cuts to state school spending by Vermont's previous governor, Democrat Peter Shumlin—an ally of Obama and the Clintons—who slashed public education, Medicaid spending and other vital services even as he handed over tax cuts to IBM and other corporations.

The chief tactical difference between the Democrat Shumlin and the current Republican governor Scott is that the Democrats are more willing to work with the Vermont Education Association and other unions to implement these savage austerity policies, while Scott has sought to circumvent the teacher unions by imposing state-level bargaining on teachers' health care and pension benefits.

The role of the Vermont Democrats mirrors the party's role on a national scale. The Democratic Party has long promoted pro-corporate "school choice" schemes, beginning with the Clintons in the 1990s. Obama's "Race To The Top" (RTTP) accelerated the attacks made under Bush's No Child Left Behind (co-sponsored by Democratic liberal stalwart Ted Kennedy), tying federal school funding even more closely to test-based performance standards.

This has been used to scapegoat teachers for educational problems caused by decades of reduced school funding and the immense growth of poverty, and to provide the justification for handing over the public

schools to charter school operators and private education businesses. Under Obama, nearly 9,000 public schools were closed and the number of students enrolled in charter schools tripled.

The right-wing program of Obama paved the way for Trump and his education secretary, the billionaire heiress Betsy DeVos. Trump's budget proposal includes \$1.7 trillion in cuts to social programs, including at least \$9.2 billion in education cuts. The budget also includes \$1.4 billion to promote "school choice" and voucher programs to further siphon off funds from public schools to subsidize private and parochial institutions.

The bipartisan assault on teachers and public education underscores the treachery of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, which are politically aligned with the same Democratic Party that has championed this attack. Far from opposing profit-driven "school reform," the unions have only insisted that they be "partners" in the dismantling of public education and the imposition of merit pay and other reactionary schemes.

The Burlington strike coincides with another teacher walkout in Abington Heights, Pennsylvania in the eastern part of the state. The Pennsylvania teachers are also facing an attack on their health care benefits and wages.

Teacher strikes, which were long a feature of life in America as schools opened, are now rare. There were more than 1,000 strikes involving more than 823,000 teachers between July 1960 and June 1974, and nine strikes in Chicago alone in the 1970s and 1980s. Over the last decade, the unions have essentially ended any strikes. If they call them at all, the AFT and NEA quickly isolate and betray the struggles, like the sellout of the 2012 strike by the Chicago Teachers Union, which was followed by the shutdown of 50 schools and thousands of layoffs.

There is widespread support for a political counter-offensive against the bipartisan assault on education and the liquidation of public assets for the enrichment of the corporate and financial elite. But educators must draw political conclusions. The Democrats cannot be pushed to the left, as Bernie Sanders, the former Burlington mayor, claims. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are the party of Wall Street and the Pentagon. With popular hatred of Trump growing, the

Democratic leadership in the Senate is rushing to the president's side and preparing a bipartisan deal that will accelerate the attack on health care, education and other social programs, expand the attack on immigrant workers, and hand over trillions more in tax cuts to the rich.

The struggle to defend public education, like every other democratic and social right, is above all a political struggle over how society's resources will be distributed and who will do it. If the wealth created by working people is to be used to defend and vastly improve public education and other vital services, instead of funding Wall Street bailouts and criminal wars, then the working class must be politically organized to fight for it.

The Socialist Equality Party urges Burlington teachers to organize independent strike committees, controlled by rank-and-file educators, to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class to expand funding for public education, regardless of what the two big business parties claim they can afford. Only mass struggle will decide.

We urge teachers to subscribe to the World Socialist Web Site *Teacher Newsletter* to discuss this strategy and build the necessary leadership for this critical battle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact