

Why New York City's teachers should vote "no" on the proposed contract - By Dan Lupkin

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Note: While teachers in Los Angeles Unified School District have voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, members of the largest teachers union local in the US, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City, are debating a proposed contract settlement. In this guest blog, UFT activist Dan Lupkin explains why he wants the proposed contract to be voted down. We invite other opinions on this debate underway in the UFT. - Lois Weiner



The best way to get laughed out of the UFT Delegate Assembly is to ask about lowering class size limits: "The City will never buy it." "It's that or your raises, nobody is willing to give anything up to achieve that" etc... I certainly know teachers who would be willing to make some trades for lower class size limits, but more to the point, there's no reason they should have to; we CAN demand more, we just have to be willing to back up our demands with action. At those same Delegate Assemblies, we frequently hear about the heroic Founders of the union, and how the UFT membership went out on strike (illegally) to win the rights we currently enjoy. That we have class size limits at all is testament to the power of the militancy of the UFT rank-and-file who were willing to take risks and picket, agitate, and strike for the good of the union, their students, and public education as a whole. Suggest that we do the same today to lower those limits for the first time in 50+ years and you will be dismissed as a deluded radical.

Which brings us to the contract. There seems to be a misunderstanding about what MORE means when we say that this is not the contract UFT members or NYC schools deserve. Some UFTers jump to the "defense" of the negotiating committee, arguing that they did their best they could under the circumstances, take it easy on them. Others places have it worse, they say, stop complaining. The city was never going to give us anything more, and they are going to be annoyed with us if we reject this contract, we might as well approve it. I am personally grateful that UFT members gave up so much of their own time to work on negotiating this contract, and I have no reason to think they did anything other than the best they could under the circumstances.

The problem runs much deeper than anything the negotiation committee could address: it was as though those +/- 400 people were out there on their own, with no support from their hundreds of thousands of colleagues. No rally, no march, no occupation of City Hall, no credible strike threat much less a strike certification vote. The power of workers like us lies in our labor, and if our employer is completely sure that our leadership will not leverage the potential withholding of that labor and the people power of 200,000 members, why WOULD the city cut us a better deal, regardless of how big the city's surplus is? You can't blame someone you're negotiating with for trying to get the best deal possible from their end- if we want a better result, we're going to have to apply more pressure.

The core issue here is conciliatory bargaining- it is taken as a given by UFT leadership and their very cozy counterparts in the NYCDOE (New York City Department of Education) that the slice of pie we got in the 60's is all the pie we're going to get, and contracts are just a question of how we want that

slice of pie apportioned; in fact, we are frequently reminded that if we make a fuss, we're liable to lose the slice of pie we already have. It's rarely discussed at the Delegate Assembly, at district meetings, or in official UFT communications that **militancy was how our slice of pie was achieved in the first place, and if we want more, that's how we're going to have to get it.**

I am willing to go along with the idea that a fairly limp commitment to better enforce the current (fairly elastic) class size limits was the best the negotiating committee could do; what was their leverage? Teachers across the country have been making huge gains in the last year or so by taking it to the streets via collective action with parents and community members backing them up in the #RedForEd movement. Their employers didn't want to give them a bigger slice of pie any more than ours do, and are certainly no more sympathetic to organized public sector workers than NYCDOE is, but they ended up with a bigger slice of pie because they demanded it in a way that could not be ignored. The tactics and issues have varied a bit, but in all cases, educators have brought home the goods (largely from austerity-obsessed, public education hating Republican politicians) by getting out in the streets with parents largely supporting them because they were standing up for the kids, for themselves, and for public education at large.

So let's take, for example, class size reductions. Parents and educators consistently rate it near the top of their priorities in the NYC school survey, and extensive research supports them as one of the most effective tools we have to improve education outcomes. Few people need convincing of this, since expensive private schools and public schools in wealthy suburbs would never accept 1st grade classes with 32 students (or more) the way we have here. The only constituency likely to push back against this is politicians, who do NOT want to be on the wrong side of a city full of mobilized constituents.

A genuine across the board class size reduction would be expensive for sure; our schools have been underfunded for decades, and many new school buildings would be required, it is certainly not an easy lift. I would, in fact, say it's impossible using the bargaining techniques that have produced the give-back laden contracts of the last few decades, in the same way that it is impossible to lift something heavy with both hands tied behind one's back. Those bonds are self-imposed, let's break through them! We have 200,000 UFT members and more than a million students, many of whom have people in their lives who would be willing to come out onto the streets to support the betterment of education in this city.

The UFT has a massive infrastructure that purports to get parents and community groups involved, what if we used it to mobilize the people of New York to take direct action to improve our schools? Reduced class size is an issue that unites educators, parents, and students; imagine if we utilized people power to grab a bigger piece of the pie. Asking our negotiating committee to achieve that sort of result absent support from the rest of their colleagues (and the city) IS impossible: what if we came out *en masse* to support them? I think the early UFT strikers, who established the first class size limits in this city, would be proud. More importantly, we'll have brought back an undeniable win to the community, to our colleagues, and to our students.

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