

# The Contract: What's the Rush?

The tentative contract agreement reached on November 6 between the DOE and the UFT, comes almost a full year before the current contract expires. Within two days it was rushed through the negotiating committee and the Executive Board and brought before the UFT Delegate Assembly. Most delegates had little chance to take a hard look at the details of the contract or inquire into the many questions that it raises. They certainly weren't given any time to consult with their school chapters. Why the rush? Did the UFT leadership want to get the contract signed, sealed and delivered before members had a chance to read between the lines and discover what may be lurking behind the "great gains" portrayed by the UFT and the news media?

## The City is Flush

During previous negotiations we have grown accustomed to the mayor crying about the city's poverty, but let's take a look at the current fiscal condition of the city:

- In the fiscal year that ended in June, the city had a budget surplus of \$3.5 billion after predicting at the start of the year that there would be a shortfall of over \$7 billion. For the current year the mayor expects a small surplus but come June the likelihood is that it will be much larger if the last few years serve as a guide to how accurate the mayor is in his estimates.
- The stock market has risen greatly this year and this will enable the city to greatly reduce the amount it must contribute to meet its pension obligations.
- The Campaign for Fiscal Equity's (CFE) lawsuit will certainly be settled shortly as a result of the recent election results. This will provide the DOE with additional school funding of more than \$1 billion a year.

In these circumstances we should expect our union to bargain for a contract that would start to make up for lost ground economically and at a minimum relieve some of the pain foisted upon us as a result of the last contract. So how does this proposed contract measure up?

## Scraps From The Table

Despite the rosy financial picture for the city, the UFT leadership has agreed to **raises that do not come close to even meeting the rate of inflation.**

### **Raises of 7% over two years**

- The Consumer Price Index (CPI), which measures inflation, has **risen 5.2% in the first nine months** of the year in the NYC metropolitan region
- No raise during the last 18 months of the contract

### **Lump sum payment of \$750 to be paid in January**

- A cynical person might conclude that getting a lump sum payment ten months before the old contract has expired could be a means of getting swift approval of the contract or that this payment will be made just a couple of months before the citywide UFT leadership elections take place. Perhaps they could save the city some time and money and just send the checks out along with the ballots.

## Uncertainty

The decision on whether or not to approve the proposed contract must be made with all the facts in front of us, but right now there is a lot that is not known. In the current tentative agreement we are being asked to reach a decision before all of the facts are known. Let's remember that we have still not gotten the 25-55 year retirement that was supposed to have been won in our last contract. Will the 7% raise turn out to be much less?

- For the first time in UFT history a clause has been inserted into the agreement which specifies that negotiations will take place with the city and its unions with the aim of reducing health costs to the city and that the resulting agreement will not be voted on by the membership. In the past the Municipal Labor Council has negotiated changes to health insurance by tinkering with co-payments and deductibles, but the fact that this is being put into the contract for the first time implies that what is now going to be discussed will result in far greater impact to the membership. The mayor has made it very clear that he intends to force city workers to pay a much larger share towards the cost of providing our health insurance. We must keep in mind that the demand on the Transit Workers Union (TWU) was for them to pay 1 1/2% of their salary towards the cost of health care each year. If that becomes the new pattern for all of the unions we will lose a significant chunk of the 7%.
- In the press release issued by the mayor's office announcing the agreement, there was a section talking about the increases being provided to the UFT Welfare Fund and the initiation of a new five-year longevity increase. The section was preceded by the following: "in order to address specific needs, the UFT generated internal funding to provide the following benefits." What does this mean? Are there agreements that have been made that we will find out about later?

Our union leaders are playing on our fear of something worse to get us to take the money and run. But UFT members must ask why Randi Weingarten and Mayor Bloomberg are in such a rush to have this contract - negotiated in a questionably short time - written into stone long before the expiration of the old one.

### **No Fightback For The Givebacks**

Our union leaders, who don't work in the schools, have turned their backs on the increasingly difficult working conditions and loss of rights that union members have to face for the foreseeable future since there is NOTHING in the contract that deals with the tremendous givebacks. The approval of this contract will mean that we will live under our present conditions for three (instead of one) more years until October, 2009. These include a longer school day (which has not benefited our students) and school year and the stripping of protections against excessing or unsatisfactory letters in the file.

It does nothing to give us weapons to fight back against abusive administrators. It does nothing to protect the thousands of us that will possibly face the closing of our schools that are deemed to be "failing" so they can be reorganized - the old staff exceded and left on their own to find other jobs or become day to day subs despite the number of years worked in the system. There is not a teacher in NYC that is safe from this happening to them. To add insult to injury, the new contract calls for the DOE to offer buyouts to those people who have not found a job after a year as a day to day sub. The price has not been set and will be left to some third party to decide. Can you imagine the pressures that will confront a teacher in that situation to accept the offer even if it means giving up their chosen career? The UFT puts this forward as a gain instead of the threat it is to every UFT member's job.

### **Diminished Expectations**

It is a union's job to fight for better working conditions, not roll over and play dead like they have with this contract. It is only because the expectations of UFT members are so low as a result of the last few contracts and the abuses they have faced throughout the system without any noticeable protection from the UFT that this contract is being viewed as acceptable. It is a sign of how weak and mismanaged this union really is. Do we really trust that this leadership will fight for us in the **next** contract?

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**Independent Community of Educators (ICE)**      P.O. Box 1143, Jamaica, NY 11421      (917) 992-3734  
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