

Central Falls High School firings

Rhode Island school district seeks to tear up teachers' contract

By Mike Ingram
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The mass firing of teachers at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island on Tuesday, February 23, was greeted with predictable enthusiasm by the Obama administration. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, declared, "I applaud Commissioner Gist and Superintendent Gallo for showing courage and doing the right thing for kids."

Duncan was referring to events at the school committee meeting at which the names of all 74 teachers and a further 19 staff members were read aloud in an announcement of their impending dismissal in the fall.

The firings are the result of Superintendent Frances Gallo's adoption of the so-called "turnaround" option—one of four options set out by the Obama administration for dealing with "failed schools." For the first time, Obama's education policy requires states to identify their bottom 5 percent of schools in performance and "fix" them using one of four methods. The other options are school closure, takeover by a charter school or school-management organization, and transformation, which requires a longer school day and other attacks on the working conditions of teachers.

Gallo's first choice was the "transformation" option, which included demands that would have amounted to the tearing up of the teachers' contract. Gallo laid down six conditions to be accepted by February 25, or else the teachers would be fired. Gallo demanded:

- An increase in the length of the school day by 25 minutes
- Formalize tutoring schedules to provide extra help to struggling students one hour before and after school
- Agree to eat lunch with students one day a week to build stronger relationships
- Stay after school for 90 minutes one day each week to work on analyzing student work and test data
- Attend two weeks of professional development in the summer, for which they would be paid at a rate of \$30 an hour
- Accept rigorous evaluations by a third-party starting March 1

Gallo's ultimatum was rejected by the teachers, who rightly saw it as an attempt to rip up established contracts. Teachers in impoverished schools such as Central Falls already give

substantial amounts of their free time—and money—to provide the best education they can under conditions of worsening budget cuts. The conditions laid down in the "transformation" proposals were not aimed at improving education, but rather at challenging the existing pay and conditions of teachers.

When the teachers rejected this ultimatum Gallo lost no time in switching to the "turnaround" option, which had already been agreed by State Education Commissioner Deborah Gist. It was Gist's order of January 11 to overhaul the state's lowest performing schools that set in motion the events leading to last week's firings. Gist was among the first state education chiefs to publicly list the bottom 5 percent of failing schools and use the new federal requirements as the basis for an intervention. It is for this pioneering of Obama's policy of national shake-up that Gist received the praise of Education Secretary Duncan.

The Central Falls firings have received national and even international coverage. The *Christian Science Monitor* commented on the firings, "It is possible that this is a watershed moment in US labor history, not unlike the Reagan administration's firing of unionized air traffic controllers in the early '80s. The reaction has been muted so far because the Obama administration is Democratic, but public-sector unions must be paying close attention to what is happening."

Even under conditions of a direct attack on teacher representation, however, the unions prove incapable of confronting the Democratic Party to which they have repeatedly subordinated the interests of their members. Reporting on a meeting of national and local union leaders that took place Friday, February 26, the *Providence Journal* quoted Macia Reback, president of Rhode Island Federation of Teachers, saying, "No one anticipated this. I'm not sure even the Obama administration anticipated that as a result of their regulations, there would be mass firings."

The general line of media commentary on the firings has been to portray the teachers as overpaid and unwilling to sacrifice for the good of the children. Much has been made of their supposedly exorbitant salaries of \$72,000 a year, with frequent contrasts to the median income of Central Falls, which stood at \$22,628 against the national figure of \$41,994,

according to the 2000 US Census. None of these media commentators find it necessary to mention the pay of Education Commissioner Gist, who, according to a May 2009 article in the *Providence Journal*, receives a total compensation of \$203,870 a year. Neither has anyone in the mainstream media sought to explain how firing the school's entire staff, including all teachers and the school psychiatrist, is supposed to turn the school around.

No one would deny that there are real problems in Central Falls, both inside and outside the school. The high school sits at the center of Rhode Island's smallest and most impoverished city of the same name. The square mile of Central Falls is an old mill town in which textile workers clashed with the National Guard in 1934.

Today the city is 65 percent Hispanic and home to some of the state's poorest families. The city had an official unemployment rate of 13.8 percent for December 2009, reaching as high as 16.9 percent in July of last year. In 2007 some 30.1 percent of Central Falls residents had incomes below the official poverty line, compared with 12 percent for the whole state. The official poverty rate in 2007 was \$10,210 for a one-person household and \$20,650 for a household of four people. Incredibly, some 12.5 percent of Central Falls families had incomes below 50 percent of the poverty level compared to 5.2 percent in the state as a whole. More than 43 percent of children in the city live below the poverty level compared to 17.3 percent for the state.

With figures such as these, combined with a pupil base for many of whom English is not their first language, it is hardly surprising that the local high school would rank below the national or state average for performance. The immediate vicinity of the school is littered with boarded up housing and "For Rent" signs. The impact of the economic crisis can be seen in a listing of foreclosures for the city. The high school is located on Summer Street, which is surrounded by bank owned properties. The Central Falls Department of Parks and Recreation is among the boarded up buildings.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Aaron Lessa, who lives close to Central Falls. Like many in the area, Aaron considers the problems at the high school to be reflective of the social conditions in the area, rather than the fault of the teachers.

He told the *WSWS*, "I think it's wrong that they fire all the teachers, because it can't be the teachers' fault that the kids are doing bad. For them to fire all the teachers is just going to shred their relationships with the schools. Kids build lifelong relationships with these teachers, and I'm sure that because the teachers are leaving it's going to make most kids want to leave the school. It's not going to empower kids to want to stay in school and strive to do better. It will make them look down on the school system and it is just going to make the superintendent look bad for taking the money out of all those teachers' pockets.

"If you look at Central Falls and the high school, they're one of the worst schools in the state. Economically things aren't doing too good around here, especially with the recession. Nobody has got money. It is pulling hope away from the kids. It's sending the wrong message. If people aren't doing things right, they are just going to get pushed to the side rather than brought up. Just like they are doing to the teachers, the teachers supposedly aren't doing things properly, so they are just going to fire all of them. It's not a good message to the kids.

"There were a lot of promises that Obama made. He was supposed to fix everything. It takes time to build up the economy, but there are a lot of empty promises that haven't been fulfilled. People were looking for that golden ticket after Bush left office, and everyone was putting that hope into Obama. He's not superman, but nothing's changed at all.

"There is a high drop-out rate right now. A lot of kids don't want to finish school. To be honest, if I was a student in Central Falls High School right now, I would transfer to a better school if I had the opportunity. I would go to a better high school, because if you were to go somewhere other than Central Falls you would get looked at by more colleges. The way the school system is right now there is nothing good coming out of CF, especially after firing all the teachers.

"I don't see the logic to it. They are going to give more funding to schools that get better grades and less to schools that get worse grades. There is no logic behind that. They should stop worrying about the people on top and start building people up from the bottom. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. We have to change that."

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