

Chicago Public Schools fires 600 teachers and staff

By Matthew Brennan
3 August 2010

On July 23, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Board of Education fired 600 educators and staff employees as part of an ongoing, statewide effort to close a massive budget deficit on the backs of state workers across Illinois. It is widely expected that up to 1,400 more CPS teachers and school workers will be laid off within the next two weeks, before the new school year begins.

At \$11.5 billion, Illinois currently faces one of the largest state budget deficits in the country. On July 1, Governor Pat Quinn announced budget cuts of \$1.4 billion, \$241 million of which are to come from state funding for primary and secondary education. Illinois already ranks a dismal 47th in the country in the amount of state money given to school funding and 29 schools are presently on “state financial watch,” at risk of being shut down.

Chicago Public Schools faces a \$370 million shortfall in the coming fiscal year, and CPS officials plan to make up for this by firing at least 1,000 more workers, imposing more concessions upon teachers, or both. The Chicago School Board announced in the spring that it also intended to shut down at least 14 city schools by year’s end. In addition, CPS CEO Ron Huberman has demanded that educators in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) accept eight more forms of concessions, including wage freezes, increased class sizes, unpaid holidays and recesses, and additional furlough days.

Following the announced layoffs, on July 27 the US Department of Education announced that Illinois was among its 18 state finalists for the Obama administration’s reactionary initiative known as the “Race to the Top” (RTTT). The measure encourages states to compete for a paltry \$4.3 billion nationally, none of which can be used on present operating costs in schools, according to the RTTT’s guidelines. Illinois is

eligible for roughly \$400 million of that sum, which would barely make up the budget deficit of the Chicago schools.

Under the phony guise of education reform, in addition to attacking the wages, jobs and working conditions of educators, RTTT encourages the victimization of teachers at “underperforming” schools and pushes for privatizing education and the expansion of charter schools. (See “Obama education plan boosts privatization, victimizes teachers”) US Education Secretary Arne Duncan modeled this initiative on an program he began as the previous head of Chicago Public Schools—an agenda that has been continued under Huberman.

The CPS layoffs come on the heels of what has been a brutal year for educators and school workers in Illinois. As of April 15, the Illinois Education Association (IEA) reported that over 17,000 teachers had been laid off throughout the state during the 2009-2010 school year. That number is widely expected to be larger than 20,000 before the new school year begins in mid-August. Although the exact numbers are disputed because of re-hires, within the CPS system at least 3,000 teachers and school workers have been laid off since March.

Amidst the assault on public education in Chicago, both political parties have made a massive push to privatize schools throughout the state. While shutting down dozens of public schools, the Illinois state legislature has approved 60 new charter schools since 1997, 30 in the city of Chicago alone. The recent teacher firings have also been accompanied by the hiring since March of roughly 400 educators from the non-profit organization Teach for America, a move approved by the CPS.

Another element of this privatization drive involves

the state's introduction of tax increment financing-zones (TIFs)—an urban renewal program where property taxes that go to schools are frozen, with any increases over the next 23 years going to private development. While public schools are purportedly the beneficiaries of these TIF funds, many school agencies have argued that they have received no benefits from this privatization scheme.

As the attacks continue on teachers and school workers in Chicago and throughout the state, the bureaucracies of both major teachers' unions have been complicit in pushing through the austerity agenda. The CTU and the Illinois Education Association, affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association respectively, are entirely supportive of the education agenda of the Democratic Party, both in Illinois and federally.

The AFT and the CTU leadership enthusiastically supported Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Newly elected CTU President Karen Lewis has referred to Obama's RTTT assault only as "misguided." Not to be outdone, the IEA supported the November re-election candidacy of Democratic Governor Pat Quinn, just one week after he cut \$241 million from the upcoming state budget.

Arne Duncan, responding to public criticism from the NEA, recently commented to National Public Radio that he has worked hand-in-hand with union leadership in implementing the RTTT:

"Well, actually, we worked very, very closely together. And I have a great working relationship with Dennis Van Roekel at the NEA, and Randy Weingarten at the AFT. And I think they're great, visionary leaders with courage. And it's actually interesting, the two states that won in the first round [in the first Race to the Top installment] were actually states with tremendous NEA participation—100 percent support."

In opposing the layoffs of teachers and school workers, both the CTU and the IEA have instead called for a state income tax increase of up to 5 percent, a proposal Governor Quinn has announced he intends to pursue this fall. While the union leadership and the Democratic Party pose these tax increases as an alternative to the further firing of teachers, in reality this measure seeks to make up for the budget deficit on the backs of all sections of the working class.

Many workers in Illinois—a state with the fifth highest

unemployment rate in the country and almost 30 percent of the population below the poverty line—are already living precariously close to social and economic ruin. The tax increase would only serve to push workers even further into despair.

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