

Striking teachers speak out in Chicago

By Kristina Betinis
11 September 2012

On Monday, more than 25,000 teachers began a strike against demands by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Chicago Public School (CPS) Board that they accept major attacks on job security and benefits. There is a determined opposition among teachers, which is placing them in conflict not only with Emanuel, but the entire political establishment.

Thousands of teachers participated in pickets at schools throughout the city and a demonstration in the evening was attended by several thousand.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers about the issues in the strike and its political implications. In addition to the specific demands of Emanuel, many teachers said that the primary causes of the strike included inequality in schools, large class sizes and terrible educational conditions, including a lack of air conditioning in the warm months.

Jinny Gerhardt, a 6th and 8th grade special education teacher, and Jillian Forster-DeHaan, a 2nd grade teacher, were picketing early Monday morning outside Peirce Elementary on the far north side of Chicago. They spoke at length about the strike and the future of education.

“CPS in general isn’t interested. Emanuel and [CPS CEO Jean-Claude] Brizard haven’t showed up to any of the negotiations. [School Board President David] Vitale just showed up a couple of days ago,” Gerhardt said. “And there is a sense this isn’t just about Chicago. A lot of teachers are also struggling in Wisconsin and New York.

“The 800-pound gorilla in the room is poor kids. CPS doesn’t want to teach them.”

Forster-DeHaan added, “They’re not interested in educating poor kids. I was fired in a turnaround [a privatization scheme in which teachers and staff are fired and the school is sold off to private interests] at a very poor school. It was awful. But it was the only way

any increased funding was going to get to that school.

“In a way, it’s such a bummer that some people don’t support us, because you work so hard. The hours are insane. The job is all-consuming, and it’s always changing. You dream about it. You’re always thinking and reflecting on how you can do better.”

Michael Strening, Jr., a music teacher, spoke about the causes of the strike.

“It’s not about the money at all. It’s about wrap-around services—support staff, social workers, after-school programs and working conditions. I had to take a group of kids into a corridor because there is no A/C in our building. It’s too hot to learn.”

Strening connected the attack on teachers and other workers to the financial crisis of 2007-08. “When I saw on CNN that with the financial collapse, when bond traders had lost everyone’s money, featured guests on the programs blamed public workers, unions, pensions, then I knew we were in trouble. They were going to blame the public workers for the lost money they had gambled away.”

In the afternoon, a march of teachers around CPS headquarters was organized by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). No statements were made by the CTU leadership. The rally dissolved after two hours when police on horseback broke up the march and reopened the streets to auto traffic.

One teacher who declined to be identified was shouting, “The biggest problem is poverty, and nobody wants to talk about that!”

An SEP supporter broke in to say, “Workers are talking about it all over. It’s the Democratic and Republican Parties that aren’t talking about it. They refuse to talk about it, but it’s the reality teachers are facing, in the classroom and also at home. The Democrats and Republicans want working people to pay for the financial crisis, and teachers have been first on the firing line.”

Upon hearing that, a number of teachers came over to take a statement being distributed on the political issues in the teachers' strike.

Curtis, a middle school math teacher, enthusiastically agreed that working people should break from the Democratic Party and took a handful of SEP literature. A supporter explained that the SEP is running a socialist presidential campaign against both Romney and Obama.

"Obama!" Curtis exclaimed with contempt. A discussion ensued on the SEP 2012 election campaign and the fight for socialism in the working class.

Curtis spoke about having worked at a turnaround school where the climate was so politicized it was impossible for teachers to work effectively and many left. "Some of them are still out," he said. "I doubt they'll return."

Sheila, a registered nurse in the Chicago Public Schools, held a sign describing the conditions facing support staff in CPS. She also agreed that the CTU, because of its support for the Democratic Party, is going to agree to a sell-out contract for teachers. "That's the problem," she said, "our voices are insignificant."

Julia, a special education teacher at Frazier, spoke against funding schools with property taxes, which is the norm throughout the United States, "You wouldn't believe what we deal with, the situations children are coming from. There is so much poverty. Education is the key to social change. If the schools are unequal, then so is the education. That's the biggest problem."

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