

Union seeks to block strike, impose givebacks on Rockford, Illinois school employees

By George Gallanis
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On February 10, the Illinois American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31 reported that 900 bus drivers, paraprofessionals and food service workers employed by the Rockford Public Schools (RPS) were “as close as they could be” to striking.

Contract negotiations with the school district, located 90 miles northwest of Chicago, began in June 2016. While there is a strong sentiment among RPS workers to strike, AFSCME is doing everything it can to smother it and force workers to accept a sellout contract.

In January, the Rockford Public Schools Board of Education voted and passed its “last, best and final” contract, which includes derisory raises and a sharp increase in health insurance premiums. The contract is in full effect and legally binding, although RPS officials say they are willing to continue negotiations with AFSCME Local 692, AFSCME Local 1275 and AFSCME Local 3210.

District officials have been emboldened by Republican Illinois governor, Bruce Rauner, who unilaterally imposed a new concessions contract on roughly 38,000 state workers, also AFSCME members, last November.

Under the previous contract terms in Rockford, a bus driver hired in 2013, and starting at \$11.41 an hour, would have made \$13.54 an hour in 2017, an increase of \$2.13 over four years. Under the new contract, these workers will be bumped up to \$14 an hour, meaning they would have received a de facto raise of \$2.59 over four years.

The rate of annual pay increases, however, will decrease significantly from now on. Under the new contract, after four years bus drivers will receive a 37 cent pay increase. To reach the same increase of \$2.59,

which took four years under the previous contract, will now take roughly nine and a half years.

Paraprofessionals will receive a 3 percent raise the first year, a 2.5 percent increase the second year, and 1.9 percent in the third year. Compounded, the yearly increases, totaling 7.4 percent, are less than the compounded yearly average rate of inflation of 2.5 percent, a total of 7.5 percent. This amounts to a de facto pay cut.

Food service workers will only receive a 3 percent increase the first year, a 2.5 percent increase the second year and nothing the third year, again amounting to a cut in real pay when taking inflation into account.

These paltry wage increases will be offset by huge increases in health insurance premiums costs. Depending on the plan, all workers will pay between 17.5 percent and 20 percent of their total health insurance premiums, up from 12.5 to 15 percent from the previous contract.

Under the previous family plans a worker paid at least \$136 a month. Now he or she will have to pay between \$218 and \$278.81 a month, an increase of hundreds of dollars per year.

Under such conditions, workers are determined to defend their living standards. Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a Rockford bus driver said, “I am ready to strike. I believe the pay they are offering us is unfair. I’ve been there for five years and I am making pennies over what the new hires are making.”

AFSCME says the average annual pay for a bus driver is \$16,181, for a paraprofessional it is \$14,280 and \$11,373 for a food service worker. These are poverty or near-poverty wages.

“It would honestly be better if I were to quit and reapply for my position,” the worker added. “The new drivers are making better money than I am. I had to

work my way up to the \$14 an hour I'm making. Are the people that have seniority not worth the raise we are asking for?"

When asked how difficult it was to live off a bus driver's wage, she replied, "Very hard. I am a mother of two little ones with rent, a car payment and all the utilities, and I made \$11,000 this year. I do not get any government assistance. To deliver my youngest, my portion for out-of-pocket was \$6,000—or over half of my pay for the year."

The anger and desire to fight among workers was expressed when bus drivers voted last November 183-4 to authorize a strike. Even after the RPS board unilaterally imposed its draconian contract, AFSCME has refused to call a strike, let alone issue a strike authorization vote for paraprofessionals or food service workers.

As with the 38,000 Illinois state workers represented by AFSCME who are under contract negotiations with the state, AFSCME is seeking at all costs to avert a strike and avoid any possible confrontation with the government.

AFSCME representative Ed Sadlowski, brother of Chicago Alderwoman Sue Sadlowski-Garza and son of Eddie Sadlowski a former United Steelworkers union leader, stated, "We're trying to exhaust all remedies before we file to go on strike. We're going to be responsible with that authority. We want to be responsible to our membership and the citizens of Rockford. ... It's the school district that's bringing this on. We're still willing to negotiate."

AFSCME's record makes clear this will only lead to more concessions for workers. As if suffering from temporary amnesia, AFSCME writes on its web site, "Demonstrating their unity and determination to win a fair contract that ends poverty wages and keeps health insurance affordable, Rockford school bus drivers voted overwhelmingly to authorize their union bargaining committee to call a strike if the school district continues to refuse to treat drivers fairly."

In reality it has been AFSCME, which is aligned with the state and local Democratic Party officials, that had forced workers to accept poverty wages under the guise of a "fair contract."

In 2013, the year the last contract was signed, Betty Christenson, president of the AFSCME paraprofessional Local 692, stated, "This was a tough

negotiation, and while nobody got everything they wanted, it's a fair contract. The pay increases will help keep pace with health premiums, and the no-cost preventive care will keep everyone healthier."

Workers should take this struggle into their own hands by forming independent rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to AFSCME, the AFL-CIO, the Republican and Democratic parties and the capitalist system they defend. RPS workers should appeal for the broadest mobilization of the working class, calling upon the 38,000 state workers and beyond to defend and fight for the social rights of all public and private sector workers.

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