

In wake of Rhode Island firings

More teachers and “failing” schools targeted by Obama education policy

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The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education announced on Thursday a list of 35 so-called underperforming schools, where the jobs and contracts of teachers are directly threatened.

That same day in Boston, the state capital, Mayor Thomas Menino and Superintendent Carol R. Johnson announced that teachers at six “underperforming” city schools would be forced to reapply for their jobs, and that five school principals would be reassigned to different positions.

The moves follow the February 23 firing of all 74 teachers and 19 other staff members at a public high school just over the Massachusetts border in Central Falls, Rhode Island. School Superintendent Frances Gallo carried out the wholesale firings at Central Falls High School after teachers rejected demands to work extra hours without pay.

The mass firings of the Central Falls teachers were based on the Obama administration’s national strategy to deal with 5,000 of the nation’s “failing schools,” located overwhelmingly in impoverished working class areas.

President Obama hailed the Central Falls firings, in which the teachers’ union contracts were ripped up. He stated that if teachers and administrators continue to “fail” their students year after year, and a school “doesn’t show signs of improvement,” then “there’s got to be a sense of accountability. And that’s what happened in Rhode Island.”

He made it clear the firings were to serve as a model to impose his right-wing education agenda on teachers and other school employees throughout the country. In addition to potential mass firings, teachers will be subjected to merit pay and other “performance-based” schemes, along with plans to close thousands of public schools and replace them with privately owned charter schools with non-union teachers and staff.

At both the local and national level, the unions representing teachers have demonstrated their willingness to work in partnership with Obama’s assault on the teachers, the targeted schools and their students.

Last Monday, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers, which represents the Central Falls teachers, filed three unfair labor practice charges with the state Labor Relations Board, appealing the firings.

On Wednesday, the union signaled its readiness to drop its opposition to the school district’s original demands and offer concessions on longer work days for teachers. Despite this, there has been no offer from Superintendent Gallo or the school board to rescind the firings.

Gallo agreed to resume contract talks, but as of the weekend no negotiations had been scheduled. Rather, she invited the union to participate in a meeting of parents, district officials and other parties this Thursday.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), parent union of the Rhode Island teachers union, has collaborated with the Obama administration’s anti-teacher, anti-education agenda. In response to Obama’s public support for the mass firings in Rhode Island, union officials have expressed concerns that his action will make it more difficult for them to work with the administration.

They have made clear that the union will do nothing to mobilize teachers nationally in defense of the fired Central Falls teachers.

In an interview quoted by the *Washington Post*, AFT President Randi Weingarten stressed the union’s collaboration with the administration’s education agenda, declaring that Obama’s comments endorsing the firings “don’t reflect the reality on the ground and completely ignore the commitment teachers have made to turn things around.”

She said the union was “profoundly disappointed by the comments,” and then offered what amounts to an alibi for the president, saying he “seems to be focused on ... incomplete information.”

States across the country are scrambling to win funding from Obama’s “Race to the Top” (RTTT) program, competing for their share of \$3.5 billion in what are known

as School Improvement Grants.

Four methods prescribed for “underperforming” schools are laid out in the RTTT request for proposals from states seeking a share of the program’s \$3.5 billion in grants. School districts must implement one of them to qualify for funding.

They include: shutting down a school outright; handing it over to a charter school or other private management; imposing a longer school day and other measures on teachers; or firing all teachers and staff, with only half or fewer hired back. States competing for RTTT funds will receive extra points based on their ability to “intervene directly in both schools and LEAs (Local Education Authorities).”

In Massachusetts, the Democratic administration of Governor Deval Patrick has identified 35 “underperforming” schools. Twelve of the targeted schools, which include elementary, middle, and high schools, are located in Boston.

The remaining schools are in smaller communities throughout the state, including Lynn, Lawrence, Lowell and Springfield, cities once known for their mills and factories. Also included are schools in Fall River and New Bedford, which have been economically devastated by the demise of cod fishing in the North Atlantic.

All of these areas have been hard-hit by unemployment and poverty. In December 2009, unemployment stood at 17.8 percent in Lawrence, 10.3 percent in Lynn, 15.8 percent in New Bedford, and 13.2 percent in Springfield. According to the web site www.city-data.com, estimated per capita income in 2008 was \$16,840 in Lawrence, \$22,973 in Lynn, \$21,760 in New Bedford, and \$18,187 in Springfield.

Many of the schools on the state’s list are in districts with high African-American and Hispanic populations. In Boston, for example, 36.5 percent of public school enrollees are African-American and 39.6 percent are Hispanic, compared to statewide averages of 8.2 percent and 14.8 percent respectively. In Springfield, the numbers are 22.3 percent African-American and 56.7 percent Hispanic; while in Lawrence 89.4 percent of students are Hispanic.

The Obama administration insists that RTTT provides “unprecedented” levels of funding. Perhaps the funding is “unprecedented” when compared to the state grants described in the Massachusetts RTTT proposal, which in 2006 gave “up to \$25,000 each in state grants for underperforming schools and up to \$150,000 each for chronically underperforming schools.”

However, a federal RTTT grant would give Massachusetts no more than \$250 million, to be spread over four years. The city of Lynn alone spends more than \$130 million per year on its public schools. Furthermore, the RTTT funds are from

the administration’s 2009 stimulus program—the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—and therefore non-renewable.

The Patrick administration’s RTTT proposal promises that “Massachusetts is committed to pursuing our agenda with or without RTTT funding. We will support our most critical investments, such as ... redesigning our accountability, assistance, and educator development systems; and improving our data systems, through private or repurposed funding.”

Patrick boasts of building on the successes of his Republican predecessors, including a 1993 school reform law passed under Governor William Weld that mandated public funding for privately run charter schools.

As in Rhode Island, the Massachusetts attack on public education is derived directly from federal policy. The “intervention” methods proposed by the Patrick administration include “transforming the entire career continuum and licensure system for both principals and teachers.”

This would represent a direct attack on tenure and other job security provisions. A law passed by the Massachusetts legislature in January to support Patrick’s reforms allows teachers to be fired for “good cause” rather than the traditional “just cause.” The term “good cause” is defined nowhere in the law, which allows for teachers to be fired on five days’ notice.

Local teachers unions have for the most part supported Patrick’s effort. Union representatives from more than 200 school districts have signed the Memoranda of Understanding that is required as part of the RTTT application process.

When he signed his education reform package into law in January, Patrick noted the input of the teachers’ unions in drafting a policy that directly threatens their members’ jobs and working conditions. “It’s not about a critique on the profession of teaching, or on unions for that matter,” he said. “Indeed, the union leadership was responsible for shaping much of this bill.”



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