

Fired Rhode Island teachers to keep jobs in concessions deal

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Teachers and other staff at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island, who were fired en masse in February, will keep their jobs under an agreement overwhelmingly ratified Monday by the 336 members of the union representing the city's teaching staff.

An agreement was reached Saturday night following more than 40 hours of mediation, facilitated by a federal judge, between Central Falls Schools Superintendent Frances Gallo, Central Falls Teachers Union President Jane Sessums, and a field representative from the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers.

The 74 teachers and 19 other staff members will be subject to concessions and attacks on working conditions equal to or perhaps even more drastic than demands they originally rejected, prompting the firings. Teachers must work a longer school day and must undergo a new evaluation process that may disregard seniority.

Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, hailed the agreement, commenting, "It provides for more engagement among students and teachers, more support and collaboration among the staff, more meaningful evaluation for teachers, and a greater voice for teachers in managing the school and driving reform."

The firings in February gained national attention, and were praised by President Obama. He said at the time that if teachers and administrators continue to "fail" their students, and a school "doesn't show signs of improvement then there's got to be a sense of accountability."

The summary firings in Central Falls, and the subsequent imposition of concessions, are a direct result of the Obama administration's education policy, which has targeted 5,000 of the "lowest performing schools" in the nation—mostly in impoverished working

class areas—for similar treatment.

Rhode Island Education Commissioner Deborah Gist had identified Central Falls High School as among the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state in terms of performance. The school's entire teaching staff was fired on February 23 after rejecting an ultimatum from Superintendent Gallo to submit to a "transformation" plan for the high school.

"Transformation" is one of four options proposed by the Obama administration to deal with "failing schools." The others options are school closure, takeover by a charter school or school-management organization, and the "turnaround" option, which involves firing every teacher in the school, with less than half of the teachers standing a chance of getting their jobs back.

Central Falls High School, with about 850 students, sits in the center of Rhode Island's smallest city—an old mill town with 30 percent of its population living below the official poverty level in 2007. More than 65 percent of residents are Hispanic, and English is a second language for many.

These conditions inevitably find reflection in the city's schools, particularly at Central Falls High, which has struggled with dropout rates and scored poorly on standardized tests. But under the Obama's administration's skewed education policies, rather than providing funding to such cash-strapped public school districts, teachers' jobs and conditions are coming under attack, and schools are targeted for closure or opened up to privatization.

Details on the agreement worked out between the Central Falls Teachers Union and Superintendent Gallo include the following:

- the school day will be increased by 25 minutes;
- teachers must provide tutoring for one hour each

week before or after school;

- teachers are to attend 5-10 days each summer of “professional development” sessions at a rate of \$30 an hour;

- each teacher must devote 90 minutes a week of after-school planning time, to be paid with an annual stipend of \$3,000;

- a new system for teacher evaluations will take effect in September to determine which teachers will return for the 2011-2012 school year;

- a new staffing policy will eliminate strict seniority guidelines;

- the union must drop its lawsuit challenging the February firings;

- a “streamlined” collective bargaining agreement is to be developed in the next year.

It is clear that the firings at Central Falls High School, and the concessions now being forced on teachers, will serve as a bludgeon against teachers who resist the imposition of similar attacks on their jobs and working conditions.

In late March, the entire staff of Beach High School in the Savannah-Chatham Public School District in Georgia were fired, with the possibility of only 49 percent of the 200 teachers and other staff potentially regaining their positions. Superintendent Thomas Lockamy said the move was taken to avoid a state takeover and to qualify for \$6 million in aid over the next three years. Teachers in Georgia do not have collective bargaining rights.

Justin C. Cohen, president of the School Turnaround Group at the Mass Insight Education & Research Institute in Boston, told the *Christian Science Monitor* that about 20 to 30 schools each year undergo such “turnarounds” involving the firing of the staff. (The private institute facilitates “dramatic” interventions in “chronically underperforming schools,” actively promoting Education Secretary Duncan and the Obama administration’s education policies.)

The number of schools subjected to such “interventions” can be expected to rise in the future, due to Obama’s federal education policies, the drying up of stimulus funds and state budget crises.

In relation to the events at Central Falls High School, Cohen told the *Monitor*, “I hope what happens here is instead of going through the *Strum and Drang* of firing and rehiring everybody, people can really look at these

[collective bargaining] agreements” and have them be more productive from the outset.

In other words, teachers should be suitably intimidated by the firings in Central Falls and submit more readily to concessions demanded by school districts under the Obama administration education policies.

Following the agreement at Central Falls, local teachers’ union president Jane Sessums said she was “very, very pleased” with the draconian concessions deal. The union and school district issued a joint statement praising the agreement.

It read in part, “Both the school district and the union agree that while this has been a difficult process for everyone involved, the negotiations resulted in a newfound appreciation for shared responsibility, and a solid commitment to bring lasting solutions that will improve teaching and learning at Central Falls High School.”

At the national level, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said in a statement that “the events of the past few months have shown the need for a collaborative approach to school improvement.”

Over the past four months, the teachers at Central Falls High School have been left isolated by their union at both the local and national level. The teachers’ unions have shown that they will do nothing to defend teachers’ jobs, or to fight arbitrary firings and other attacks on school workers’ rights and working conditions.

A defense of education requires a break with this leadership and the elaboration of a new political struggle and perspective, based on a socialist program. The defense of education must further be linked to the fight for decent health care, housing and other basic social needs.



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