

Mass teacher firings in Washington, DC

Walter Gilberti
27 July 2010

On Friday, Washington DC's schools chancellor Michelle Rhee fired 241 public school teachers. Of the teachers fired, 165 were terminated after they received a "poor" evaluation, based on the districts new evaluation system that measures teacher effectiveness primarily from student performance on standardized tests.

Rhee is threatening to fire another 737 teachers at the end of the upcoming school year. These teachers have been rated as being "minimally effective" according to the same yardstick. Rhee justified the firings, cynically declaring, "Every child in a District of Columbia school has the right to a highly effective teacher." Rhee added, in a further threat, "a not insignificant number of folks will be moved out of the system for poor performance."

The firings are significant both for their draconian nature as well as for their location in the nation's capital, where the Obama administration is spearheading his school "reform" agenda based on the scapegoating of teachers and the implementation of market-based measures. This includes the "Race to the Top" program, a sordid competition that allows for the unfettered spread of charter schools and stripping teachers of long-standing working conditions and living standards, in exchange for funding.

This latest attack is an escalation of the ruthless firing of teachers and staff members in Central Falls, Rhode Island last February. In a move hailed by Obama and his Education Secretary Arne Duncan—for holding teachers "accountable" for so-called failing schools—the district terminated 74 teachers and 19 other school employees after they refused to work extra hours for no pay. The employees were only reinstated after their union capitulated to the district's demands.

The firing of the DC teachers will be used as a precedent to terminate tens of thousands of instructors throughout the country who are being blamed for poor

academic results.

The Washington Teachers Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, paved the way for the assault, pushing through a contract last June that wipes out long-standing job security provisions in exchange for raises and merit pay bonuses. AFT President Randi Weingarten made it clear the union would take no action to defend the victimized teachers and appealed to Rhee to work with the AFT under the terms of the new deal to implement "valid teacher evaluation systems."

Recommended by Joel Klein, who led the assault on the New York City public schools, Rhee was appointed Chancellor in 2007 by DC Mayor Adrian Fenty because of her well-known opposition to job security and other rights won by teachers over decades of struggle. Upon being selected to head the DC school district, Rhee declared that poverty and decaying neighborhoods were no barrier to educational success, only poor teachers were.

This is the same rubbish peddled by Obama and Duncan, under conditions in which they are slashing the resources available to teach students and are doing nothing to end the crushing level of poverty and social inequality that plague America's cities and schools.

Washington, DC is one of the most socially polarized cities in the nation. About two-thirds of the children in the district's public and public charter schools are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch because they come from low-income families. DC's child poverty rate is 32 percent. The current unemployment rate in the city is 12 percent; and the official poverty rate rose 18.9 percent in 2009, up from 16.9 percent the previous year.

Like school districts across the nation, Washington, DC students and teachers have faced years of budget cuts, school closings and layoffs. Last year, hundreds of students walked out of classes and joined protests

against teacher layoffs and other cutbacks.

The district's teachers are being blamed for these conditions. At the same time they are judged by a bogus evaluation system, based entirely on test scores. It has been well documented that districts and charter schools have raised scores using all sorts of unscrupulous measures while no real improvement in education was achieved. This includes "teaching to the test," sending home or suspending low-performing students before tests, etc.

Rhee's onslaught against teachers has earned her the support from the major media conglomerates on both sides of the narrow political spectrum of official America; the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*, which on Sunday declared that Rhee "should be supported for taking the difficult but necessary steps to rid the system of ineffective teachers."

She has also received funding from various foundations and think tanks devoted to an unrelenting war against the teachers and public education. The new evaluation system Rhee is employing is dubbed IMPACT, and is the brainchild of a group called Mathematica Policy Research, a Princeton, New Jersey-based public policy institute, which claims to offer expertise in a wide range of initiatives involving education, health care, and "labor policy" research.

Their web site explains that they employ the business model, in the form of the nebulous concept of "value added", when appraising improvement made by students in standardized tests. Such a conception, used in determining profitability in commodity production, has no place in the complex and largely qualitative process of educating children.

Washington Teachers Union President George Parker complained the firings were "punishment-heavy and support light," adding, "They've gone too far too fast." Earlier this year, however, he praised the sellout deal that paved the way for the firings as a "great day for teachers and students."

Teachers and all those who defend public education must oppose the firing of the Washington, DC teachers. The precondition for any serious fight, however, is a break with the rotten trade union organizations, which are thoroughly tied to management and the Democratic Party, and build new organizations that will embark on an independent political struggle to unite teachers and the entire working class.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact