

Chicago teachers speak about mass layoffs

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Since June of this year, 2,000 teachers and staff in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have been laid off. The mass firings are part of an effort to use the state's education budget shortfall, estimated at \$370 million, to privatize the public schools.

WSWS reporters attended a job fair held on August 24, one of two this year open only to Chicago Public Schools teachers laid off in 2010. The fair was described by several teachers who attended as little more than a stunt and a show for the media. Teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the organization of the job fair and the meager offerings. Many of those who left the fair's morning session early told WSWS reporters that very few schools even participated. Furthermore, no one they had spoken with had been offered an afternoon interview.

Most of the teachers at the fair were tenured employees who had been laid off. They had not been reassigned to work at other schools and had even been denied the right to enter into the city's pool of substitute teachers. On August 13, lawyers for the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) filed suit in federal court, citing the layoffs without reassignment as illegal and requesting an injunction to restore 1,400 positions immediately.

Several teachers at Tuesday's fair described the circumstances surrounding their layoff. In some cases, administrators used loopholes and other questionable methods to get rid of them, including changing the title of their position or its seniority level. The aim of these tactics was to boot out more-experienced and better-paid teachers, replacing them with cheaper labor.

In other cases, educators simply did not even know the basis upon which their positions had been terminated. In some instances, teachers' final paychecks were withheld without explanation.

Jeanine Williams has taught in the CPS system for 10 years, most recently in the Chatham neighborhood of

Chicago. She told WSWS reporters, "Many tenured teachers here are laid off and not reassigned. We don't know why we aren't being allowed to substitute teach. I was laid off and before I was due back, they said, 'We're keeping your last paycheck.'"

When asked what she thought was behind the attacks on public education and teachers, she replied, "Money. It's not the kids. It's money. You can hire three new, untenured teachers for the price of a tenured teacher."

"There is due process for firing teachers," she added. "This is not it. To have [CPS Chief] Huberman get on the news and say that the majority of teachers laid off had an unsatisfactory rating is false."

Speaking about the recent extension of the school day, Williams noted, "While the kids take the extra classes that extend the school day, there will be some non-union personnel to watch them."

Ingrid, an 8th grade science teacher, has taught in the CPS on and off for 10 years. She spoke as a laid off teacher without tenure. "They don't have to give you an excuse for why you're not needed. They don't have to tell you why. They just want to have more charter schools and have funding from private sources."

Angry at the character of the event she was attending, Ingrid added, "This invitation-only [job] fair is total bullsh--."

Rachel, a tenured CPS teacher who has been out of work for two years, has been coming to career fairs since 2008 in search of work. She explained to the WSWS that if she did not find a teaching position soon, she would lose 25 percent of her pension.

Several teachers with whom the WSWS spoke strongly opposed the privatization of the public schools. A 30-year veteran teacher, who wished to remain anonymous, described the so-called "turnaround" method used at her former high school to supposedly improve education. The current teaching staff was terminated and replaced with volunteers from

Teach For America. “They are taking advantage of the economy,” she explained.

“Panels of teachers and other educators should be running public schools democratically, and there should be full transparency,” she added.

Having been fired for poor student performance she lamented, “I spent my whole life teaching, and I feel defamed.”

Tim Bewley, a reading and writing teacher for the second and fourth grades, told the WSWS, “Today was a farce, and show and tell for the news. What they’re doing to tenured teachers is criminal. It’s not fair to the kids. I am a qualified teacher, pushed out because of monetary reasons.”

Computing teacher Barbara Cottrell explained the demoralizing treatment teachers face in the CPS. After having been part of a successful effort to improve the basic skills of students at one school, the school board then handed the institution over to the private Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL).

The AUSL has taken over at least 19 primary and secondary schools in the poorest neighborhoods in the CPS system. The so-called “turnaround” process they employ includes firing all existing teachers and staff. AUSL, which was founded by venture capitalist Martin Koldyke, is directed by a raft of private equity executives, venture capitalists, and other business interests.

Arne Duncan, secretary of education for the Obama administration, made a high-profile effort to incorporate AUSL into the CPS. He continues to champion it and organizations like it as the best solution to problems facing educators.

Another teacher with whom the WSWS spoke, who also wished to remain anonymous, recalled teaching in a CPS high school that was severely understaffed, having only two social studies teachers in the entire school. Referring to the current practice of using standardized testing scores as a measure of teacher job performance, she called it “a premise to bleed us out.”

Sharon Langston, a substitute teacher, was looking for a permanent position at the job fair. She told the WSWS that she had worked at eight different schools in the last two weeks and was appalled and discouraged by the conditions she saw.

She also voiced her opposition to the policies of the Obama administration, “It’s so sad. I almost don’t

know what to think. I would not vote for him. These wars? No! I expected the wars to come to a halt. He promised all these things, even to teachers.”

As the break period ended and teachers who were not invited for afternoon interviews were told to leave the convention hall, some began expressing their fears about their future prospects. Joseph Zrndik told the WSWS, “People’s lives are being destroyed.”

He spoke of applying for Medicaid and food stamps for his family, but was unsure about how he would keep his home and car. “I have years of payments left,” he said.



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