

Chicago residents occupy public school field house

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Since September 15, parents and students and residents of the Pilsen neighborhood on Chicago's south side have occupied a field house at Whittier Elementary School.

The building currently houses after-school programs and is the neighborhood's community center. It is targeted for immediate demolition by the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) administration. CPS plans to raze the building and has said it will fill the space with a soccer field.

Residents are demanding that the building be renovated as a library, something Whittier sorely needs. Their action is a courageous step forward in defense of the public school system in the city and deserves the broadest support of the working class.

For seven years, parents, students and teachers have pleaded with the CPS administration to provide the school with a proper library. Fully 90 percent of Whittier students are low-income. Few have access to computers or the Internet, and most speak English as a second language.

Residents told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the CPS was handing over the grounds to a neighboring private Catholic school, Cristo Rey High School. Gabriel Hernandez, a graduate of Whittier and Cristo Rey, told the WSW, "I think what they're trying to do here is wrong. Cristo Rey has a great library. It's unfair for them to take it [the field house] away."

The CPS has allocated \$354,000 to tear down the building, which it claims is unsafe and unsalvageable. Pilsen residents hired an independent engineering firm to assess the facility, which came to the conclusion that it required roof repairs and renovation totaling only \$25,000. Some sympathetic contractors have offered to make the repairs for free, parents said.

The school itself is in need of repairs. Class sizes are

large, and there is little room for storage.

The school grounds are bare, mostly concrete with a few playground equipment sets and two basketball nets. Pilsen is a largely working class neighborhood that has recently seen some efforts at gentrification aimed at attracting wealthier professionals.

The neighborhood's branch of the Chicago Public Library system has been closed for renovations since June.

Some 30 residents are occupying the building. Now in its sixth day, the protest has come under increasing pressure from the CPS and the police. After parents and students gathered inside the field house last week, CPS sent a locksmith to change the locks, and soon after posted a sign declaring that the building was unsafe for occupancy. Protesters promptly removed the sign.

CPS security guards posted another sign reading: "Off Limits. Do Not Enter." In response, the protesters installed an interior padlock latch on the door.

Last Friday there was a six-hour standoff between parents and CPS officials backed by a heavy police presence. Police erected barricades around the school and set a 2:45 p.m. deadline for the occupation to end, saying that after that time the building would be raided and the demonstrators arrested.

Parents said they would not leave until CPS officials arranged a meeting with the school system's chief executive officer Ron Huberman. A CPS spokeswoman on the scene, Monique Bond, told protestors that Huberman would meet with them next week if they would vacate the building, and that the demolition would be put on hold until after that meeting. When protestors asked for the terms in writing, Bond refused. Residents declared that the occupation would continue.

Speaking to reporters at the school, Bond declared, "With the budgetary constraints we are under, nothing

is going to happen. That building has to come down.”

CPS officials then posted “No Trespassing” signs all over the facility, and the police moved in to force the protestors out. They were met with mass opposition outside the school gates in support of the occupation. According to media reports, when police approached the field house door, over 100 residents pushed through the barricades shouting “Si Puedo!” [“Yes we can!”]

A *Chicago Sun-Times* reporter on the scene described “a sea of parents, students and teachers ... They pushed past police, some fighting their way into the field house. And when it seemed the crowd was out of control, police and CPS officials suddenly broke camp and left. Shouts of ‘We won!’ went out.”

Parents told the *World Socialist Web Site* they were determined to force the CPS to halt the demolition. Lisa Angonese, whose children just started at the school, said, “We’re still in and sleeping there until our needs are met. We need a signed letter from Huberman that this will be a library.”

The occupation is in some respects the first open expression of long-simmering working class resistance to relentless attacks on the public education system in Chicago. The Democratic administrations in city hall, the state capitol and the White House have all pursued an agenda of privatizing, downsizing and cost-cutting. Top government officials who have come out of the Chicago Democratic Party machine—Education Secretary Arne Duncan and President Obama among them—view the “transformation” of the city’s schools as a major front in the assault on public education nationwide.

The economic crisis has served as a pretext to slash spending on public education. Since 2008, dozens of the city’s public schools have been shuttered. This represents an acceleration of a long-standing process. Over the past 8 years, more than 10 percent of Chicago schools have been shut down.

Since June of this year, 2,000 teachers and staff have been laid off. Schools serving the poor areas of the city, including Pilsen, are increasingly being subjected to punitive performance-based funding schemes.

Schools that lack basic resources and have student populations with higher needs, such as bilingualism, perform more poorly on standardized tests. Lower scores are then used to justify mass layoffs, further withholding of funds, and the selloff of schools to for-

profit charter operations.

Last year, CPS closed a middle school, De La Cruz Academy, in the Pilsen neighborhood, even though the school had good test scores. Using an absurdly high 30:1 student-to-teacher ratio as a measure of classroom utilization, school administrators declared the school under-utilized and shut it down in June of 2009. Within a month and a half, a charter school opened up in the building on a virtually rent-free basis.

Pilsen residents should place no confidence in the CPS administration or the Democratic Party establishment to respond to their appeals. It is not a matter of convincing this or that official, but rather of recognizing the reactionary political role played by Huberman, Mayor Daley and Obama.

The drive to dismantle public education in the working class and poor neighborhoods of Chicago is part of a process that has shattered the social infrastructure in communities such as Pilsen and concentrated resources in the wealthy areas. Public housing, transportation, libraries, the health care system and other basic services have all been devastated by funding cuts and allowed to deteriorate. Coupled with high rents and a dearth of decent-paying jobs in manufacturing, working families are being priced out of the city altogether.

Pilsen residents can sustain their struggle only by appealing for support from all sections of the working class in Chicago and nationally.



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