

# Public school teachers strike in Danville, Illinois

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About 600 public school teachers and staff in the city of Danville, located in east central Illinois, went out on strike on Monday morning after federally-mediated negotiations between the Danville Education Association (DEA) and the Danville Consolidated School District 118 Board of Education failed to resolve differences between the two parties.

Teachers are demanding modest wage increases and that the school move to rehire teachers and school nurses laid off as a result of recent emergency budget cutbacks. DEA members voted overwhelmingly to authorize the strike, the first among teachers in the city since 1977.

Negotiations for a new collective bargaining contract have been ongoing since April of this year. The strike comes after a marathon bargaining session that began at 2 p.m. Sunday broke down at 4 a.m. Monday without an agreement. Schools were closed and teachers and support staff were walking the picket lines as of 8 a.m. this morning throughout this depressed industrial city.

Robin Twidwell, President of the Danville local of the National Education Association (NEA), expressed disappointment today that the negotiators for the Board of Education forced the district's teacher and support staff onto the picket lines. "There will be no school today because the people the district is paying to negotiate for them have rejected all attempts by the teachers and staff to get an agreement," she said.

In an interview with the press, Twidwell went on to say that one of the main points of disagreement was the board's insistence on a pay freeze. She also criticized the board's refusal to discuss the rehiring of certified

school registered nurses and teachers laid off in the past year as a result of emergency cost-cutting measures. The board wants to hire non-certified nurses. Twidwell also said the board ignored the DEA's proposed two-year salary schedule freeze with a one-time salary enhancement to veteran teachers.

"The board's paid negotiators have failed to offer a fair contract. That is why the schools are closed," Robin said. "The board members were elected to negotiate contracts, so they should come to the table and do the work they were elected to do".

Mark Denman, Superintendent of Schools, in a press release by the board said, "The DEA's demands are just not fiscally responsible. To get a deal done, we proposed to do what most districts have done this year, but it wasn't enough," Denman said.

The attempt by both the union and the school board to portray the situation in Danville as a purely local issue obscures the fact that the assault on public education is being orchestrated from the Obama administration through its "Race to the Top" initiative, which pits school districts and states against each other over paltry funding distributed based on the destruction of long-standing work rules and the promotion of competitive standardized testing among students.

Far from opposing these measures, the NEA, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and their Illinois affiliates have collaborated with the Obama administration and state politicians in enforcing them, having dropped their opposition to similar plans pushed by the Bush administration with its No Child Left Behind program. The teachers' unions spent millions of their members' dues to elect Obama and Democrats like Illinois Governor Pat Quinn who are promoting

what is, in all but name, a class-based system of public education in the US.

Like school districts across the country, the Danville school district is attempting to force teachers and students to pay for shrinking budgets. The board proposed a salary freeze in the first year with no change in health insurance costs and benefits of the contract and, significantly, bonuses based on student performance in the later years. Alternatively, the board offered to increase employees' salaries by 2 percent in exchange for changes to health insurance in a one year deal, according to Denman.

The *World Socialist Web Site* attempted to obtain interviews from those teachers and support staff walking the picket lines around the Jackson Administration Building in Danville this morning. Most of them declined, explaining that the leadership of the DEA had imposed a gag order on them prohibiting them from talking to reporters.

One teacher, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, "We had to go on strike to protect our jobs, wages and our ability to give our students the education they need and deserve. I would rather be in class teaching them, not out here on the picket line. We have to draw the line somewhere. Our children deserve the best education we can give them. Most of those here today would agree with me."

The teachers' determined efforts to defend their jobs and public education in Danville must be linked up with teachers and public sector workers throughout Illinois and the US who are everywhere facing the same attack. Immediate preparations should be made for a broadening of the struggle based upon a democratically elected committee of teachers, students, and workers from the community.

This requires a political approach that rejects the consensus among the Democrats, Republicans, and the unions that workers, social programs, and public education must pay for the economic crisis.



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