

Central Falls, Rhode Island teachers face renewed attacks

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Teachers at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island are facing renewed threats to their jobs and working conditions. Last February 23, 74 teachers and 19 staff members at the high school in the small impoverished town were fired en masse as part of a “turnaround” plan imposed by Central Falls Schools Superintendent Frances Gallo.

The firings came after teachers refused to accept demands that would have amounted to tearing up their contract, including a longer school day and rigorous evaluations by a third party.

The “turnaround” plan implemented by Gallo was one of the options put forward by President Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, to deal with 5,000 designated “failing schools” across the country. Obama hailed the teacher firings, stating that if a school “doesn’t show signs of improvement, then there’s got to be a sense of accountability.”

A “settlement agreement” ratified May 17 by the Central Falls teachers rescinded the firings. Facilitated by a federal judge, and agreed to by Superintendent Gallo, Central Falls Teachers Union President Jane Sessums and a field representative from the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers, the agreement imposed concessions and attacks on working conditions equal to or perhaps even more drastic than demands the teachers originally rejected, prompting the firings.

In recent weeks, the *Providence Journal* has run several articles attacking the Central Falls teachers for absenteeism and on the results of new teacher evaluations. On December, an estimated 50 students at Central Falls High School staged a walkout in support of the teachers, sparked in part by the new evaluation process.

The student protest began as a reaction against morning assemblies organized by the school administration for the purpose of channeling student discontent into support for the school administration.

Students were not willing to go along. Julie Perez, a junior, told the *Journal*, “We’re protesting against the administration. They don’t talk to us. They don’t tell us what’s going on.”

Ashley Castro, a senior, told WHDH-TV that “we want to know why teachers are getting bashed on ... why everything is getting put on the teachers’, because the teachers are awesome teachers.”

WHDH also quoted Stephanie Dos Santos, a classmate of Castro. “This blame of the teachers needs to stop,” she said. “Regardless of what happens, stop disrespecting the teachers because they don’t deserve that. That’s my main issue ... I’m out here because they can’t be out here.”

A number of the students then went inside and tried to continue the protest, but Superintendent Gallo, who was present for the assemblies, locked the front door of the school.

Gallo issued a statement after the protest, placing full blame for school problems on the teachers, while threatening the jobs of those who are out on leave, stating, “We are working as fast as possible to find highly qualified teachers and long-term substitutes to replace the unusually high and unanticipated number of teachers out on indefinite medical leave.”

The following day, state Education Commissioner Deborah Gist reiterated her support for the “transformation plan” which Gallo is imposing on the school. Rhode Island has an unusual amount of authority over the entire school district because nearly all of Central Falls’ public school revenues come from the state. In fact, the city is in so much financial trouble that this past summer the state appointed a financial receiver to replace the elected mayor.

The *Journal*’s complaints about the teachers are twofold: first, that evaluations of Central Falls High faculty conducted this fall ranked 14 of the 81 teachers “unsatisfactory,” and second, that this fall an unusual

amount of teachers on leave—including normal sick leave and long-term medical leave—has meant that students did not receive grades in some of their classes.

The teachers are working not only under the additional burdens imposed by the May agreement, but are also facing the same budget cuts and chronic underfunding suffered by public school teachers across the country. The operating budget of the Central Falls School Department decreased by nearly \$1.7 million, or 3.75 percent, between fiscal years 2009 and 2011 (the current fiscal year).

The agreement between Gallo and the head of the Central Falls Teachers Union mandated that the regular school day be extended until 3 p.m., that every teacher provide an hour of tutoring before or after school each week, that each teacher take 90 minutes per week of curricular practical training after school, and that teachers attend between five and ten days of “professional development” training for each of the next three summers.

The agreement also stipulated that in order to have the February terminations rescinded, each teacher had to attend an interview which included a 5-minute sample lesson and a personal interview session with an “instructional leadership team.”

The union also agreed to collaborate with Gallo on designing a new evaluation system for the high school teachers. According to a subsequent Revised School Reform Plan posted on the school department’s web site, the evaluations are being supported by “a bench of external evaluators and observers” from Brown University, the University of Rhode Island, the New Teacher Project and Mass Insight.

The New Teacher Project bills itself as a “revenue-generating nonprofit organization” that receives funding from the Gates Foundation and includes on its board a partner of the venture capital firm Bain Capital.

Mass Insight promises to use crises like the one in Central Falls to impose “more flexible operating conditions”—i.e., nonunion—on public school districts. While it poses as an expert in school turnarounds, its web site includes a link to a *New York Times* article that lays bare the true motives of such organizations. In it, a former chancellor of the New York City schools tells the *Times* that “this is like the aftermath of the Civil War, with all the carpetbaggers and charlatans.”

As in the recent vote to close Boston schools, a hurried process is one of the anti-democratic tactics being used against the Central Falls teachers. The “Protocol for Interventions” promulgated by state Commissioner Gist

last January allows the superintendents of threatened districts only 120 business days—which are supposed to include “substantial and meaningful opportunity for public comment”—to come up with both a reform plan and a new budget. In Central Falls, the state receiver who was appointed only this past summer is already recommending that Central Falls merge with the neighboring city of Pawtucket.

The city of Central Falls is not only too poor to fund its own public schools, but can no longer afford to provide decent pensions to its other employees and remains at the whim of predatory bond markets.

The report of the state receiver plainly declares that the city’s financial problems “created a state of concern among municipal bond underwriters and rating agencies that were performing services for the State” and that “the reaction within the bond market, which threatened to disrupt state and municipal access to capital markets” led to the new state legislation enabling the receivership. As a result, not only was the mayor replaced with a state-appointed receiver, but the elected City Council was replaced with a three-person committee appointed by the receiver.

Between December 2006 and December 2009, the assessed value of homes in the city—on which municipal tax revenues depend—dropped by 44 percent because of the bursting of the US housing bubble. The city has reacted by cutting the property tax homestead exemption nearly in half. Because this exemption applies only to those who own their homes, landlords who live in the wealthier suburbs are not affected.

As a result, the city cannot afford to provide other basic services such as lead paint abatement and adequate funding for pensions earned over decades. According to the Receiver’s report, “Although Central Falls is only the nineteenth (19th) most populated municipality in the state ... it has the third (3rd) highest number of reported cases of lead poisoning.”



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