

Providence, Rhode Island rally protests mass teacher firings

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More than a thousand people crowded in front of City Hall in Providence, Rhode Island Wednesday afternoon to protest the mass firing of the city's teaching staff. Teachers, parents and students from around the state and beyond were joined by electrical workers, plumbers, firefighters and other workers to rally in the state capital, New England's second largest city.

Shock and outrage dominated the protest in response to Mayor Angel Taveras' decision, adopted by the Providence School Board in a 4-3 vote last week, to send pink slips to 1,926 teachers and other school staff. The firings were made prior to the March 1 deadline, when teachers are required by state law to be notified if their employment status may change in the coming school year.

While the mayor claims most of the teachers will be rehired, firing the teachers allows the school district to call back teachers without regard to seniority, and leaves those who permanently lose their jobs out in the cold—with no unemployment or other benefits, and no recourse.

Cherie Sanger and her husband Dustyn held a handmade sign demanding, "Support our Teachers." Both of them teach at elementary schools in Providence—Cherie at Martin Luther King and Dustyn at Carnevale. They face the prospect of losing their family's entire income.

Dustyn said angrily, "This would never happen in any other sector, being fired for unjust cause. It's just unbelievable. We have no recourse and cannot collect unemployment."

The teacher firings come as the newly elected

Taveras, a Democrat, moves to slash spending to close a \$70 million deficit for this fiscal year and \$110 million for next year. He wants to close 4 to 6 of the city's 43 schools, which serve 23,000 predominantly low-income students in the state's largest district. Some 40 percent of Providence children live below the poverty line.

In his budget plan released Thursday, Taveras says he wants to freeze non-essential city spending and hiring, renegotiate union contracts, and eliminate 13 nonunion jobs. He will be asking city department heads to submit budgets for next year reflecting 10-15 percent across-the-board spending cuts.

The mayor reacted arrogantly to Wednesday's protest. "People will have their voices heard," Taveras told the local media, "however my resolve has not changed." His staff said the firings give him "maximum flexibility" to close schools and cut costs. He told NPR earlier, "I can't allow the taxpayers to be on the hook for paying teachers who are not working."

Parents and students at the rally, however, expressed strong support for the teachers' rights. Speaking to the crowd from the City Hall steps, Providence parent Maria Alместica received a loud ovation.

"Mr. Mayor," she said, "we don't want 35 kids in a classroom. This is not OK. Our children should be learning, not worrying. You're messing with their futures."

Mayra Paulino, parent of a student at Lima Elementary, told the WWS, "I think it's ridiculous to fire 1,926 people with no right to collect unemployment. Do we want to have an uneducated population? There are already so many kids in the classroom."

Commenting on the developments in Wisconsin, Mayra added, “I think it’s awesome. That’s what we should be doing.”

Teachers came to Wednesday’s rally from all over the state, including from Cranston, Warwick and West Warwick. Also represented was nearby Central Falls, where last year teachers at the city’s high school were fired en masse after the institution was designated a “failing school.” This move was hailed by the Obama administration and his education secretary, Arne Duncan.

Workers also came from Massachusetts and Connecticut to show their support. A group of UAW members from General Dynamics Electric Boat in Groton, Connecticut, had traveled to the rally. “This is basically a union-busting tactic,” Joe Huserdau said.

Bill Louis added, “It’s about the rights of the normal working person. We bailed out the banks and the CEOs. Let’s go after their bonuses.”

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), parent union of the Providence Teachers Union (PTU), addressed the crowd. “Something insane is going on,” she said. “I thought the only insanity was in Wisconsin.” She said the firings were “destabilizing to kids and dehumanizing to teachers.”

But when the nearby Central Falls teachers were fired a little more than a year ago, the AFT did nothing to mobilize support for them. Instead, Weingarten worried in the wake of the mass firings that “the events of the past few months have shown the need for a collaborative approach to school improvement.”

The AFT has demonstrated time and again its support for educational “reforms” such as merit pay and the destruction of teachers’ seniority rights. It has collaborated openly with the Obama administration’s anti-teacher agenda, including attacks on “incompetent” teachers and “failing” schools.

At the local level, the PTU was the first Rhode Island AFT local to sign up for Obama’s “Race to the Top” program (RTTP). Almost a year ago, Weingarten came to Providence to show her support for PTU President Steve Smith and his collaboration with Superintendent Tom Brady in a “school transformation model”

targeting four of the state’s “underperforming” schools.

Rhode Island earned \$75 million in RTTP funds as payment for implementing changes linking teachers’ pay to test scores and spreading charter schools at the expense of public education.



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