

Illinois Senate unanimously passes right-wing education reform bill

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After months of closed-door negotiations, the Illinois State Senate voted 59-0 to pass State Bill 630 on April 14. The bill introduces sweeping attacks on teachers, easing firing procedures, making it more difficult for teachers to earn tenure and to keep tenure when they change positions.

The legislation also introduces major obstacles against the ability of Chicago teachers to strike, including the imposition of a quorum and extended mediation prior to a strike vote. It also extends the power of school boards to fire teachers and lengthen school days, and removes seniority as a basis for pay, tenure or job security.

In districts outside of Chicago, teachers can be fired simply by a school board initiating the firing procedure with the agreement of an independent hearing officer.

Education reform advocates, the teachers unions—Illinois Education Association (IEA), the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT), and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU)—and leading Democratic and Republican legislators applaud the plan.

Democratic Senator Kimberly Lightford, who represents the working class Chicago suburb of Maywood, led the effort and is credited with earning the support of the teachers unions for the bill. Lightford has been quoted telling the Senate not to change “any item in this legislation whatsoever.”

Union leaders also hailed the passage of the bill, remarking that they had avoided any uproar like that which took place recently in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Ohio over budget cuts affecting schools, social services, wages, benefits and workplace rights of public employees. The website of the Chicago Teachers Union proudly proclaims, “We Avoided Another Wisconsin.”

Aware of the tremendous unpopularity of this legislation, IEA President Ken Swanson noted that the events in Wisconsin and other states “made all parties more cognizant that everyone was going to have to come away with less than their ideal on some issues.”

Swanson is hopeful that the Illinois negotiations will set an

example, “What we’ve shown is you do not have to have draconian, unwarranted attacks on public employee rights (for) collective bargaining. You can do this through collective bargaining. You can do this through bringing the parties to the table. So Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, other states, look to Illinois, we’ll show you how to do it the right way.”

The response of Illinois teachers to the bill’s quick passage has been quite different. Several teachers have commented on Fred Klonsky’s blog. Klonsky is an art teacher in a suburban school district.

In response to a post denouncing the passage of the bill and union betrayal, one teacher commented, “Feel like I was hit by a truck with members of my own family driving.”

Another wrote, “By the time they’re done, there will be nothing left to strike over anyway.”

Jerry Mulvihill, an elementary school teacher, directed his comments in a letter to IEA President Swanson, “I simply cannot and will not allow you to degrade members of this association who simply disagree with your policies any longer. I know your term as president is soon to expire and I am not sure exactly when that is. I don’t care. I am calling for your immediate resignation. You have utterly failed this association and the merits of the unification it is supposed to represent.”

The bill wraps up negotiations that began last December with the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, teachers unions, education “reform” groups and political action committees, such as Stand for Children and Advance Illinois.

Stand for Children is an Oregon-based education reform group funded by billionaires Bill Gates, Eli Broad and several other players intent on privatizing public education and promoting anti-teacher legislation in several states, including Arizona, Colorado, Indiana, Massachusetts, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas and Washington. The group raised over \$2.8 million in contributions in Illinois, \$610,000 of which went to candidates in the November election races in Illinois, according to the education website *Catalyst*.

The largest donors to the Stand for Children Illinois Political Action Committee include Kenneth Brody, manager at DRW Trading group, who contributed \$100,000; John Canning, chairman of Dearborn Partners, who contributed \$250,000; Donald Wilson, CEO of DRW Trading Group, who contributed \$250,000; and Kenneth Griffin, founder/CEO of Citadel Group, who contributed \$500,000. Several wealthy Chicagoans contributed over \$50,000, including six members of the Pritzker family, according to an itemized campaign disclosure report of the Illinois State Board of Elections.

Stand for Children poses as a “grass roots” campaign, when in fact this money comes from the state’s superrich.

The majority of the money from Stand-Illinois went to Democratic politicians. Six of these Stand-supported candidates were elected, each receiving between \$25,000 and \$100,000. According to the *Illinois Times*, one legislative lobbyist from the group was a former member of the Senate Democratic staff with long ties to Senator Kimberly Lightford. Mayor-elect Rahm Emanuel, a vocal supporter of education reform, also received contributions from Stand.

However, attempts to explain the overwhelming success of these right-wing reforms on the basis of political contributions alone, as CTU President Karen Lewis did in her April 14 letter to CTU members, fall flat. *Chicago Tribune* reports that Stand for Children had recently contributed over \$600,000 to Illinois legislators, while the two largest teachers unions—the IEA and IFT—have contributed \$17.1 million to legislators since 2001. Illinois House Speaker and Chairman of the Illinois Democratic Party House Michael Madigan formed the House Special Committee on Education Reform on December 2 last year to implement Stand’s plan under the “Performance Counts” Act.

The content of “Performance Counts” included evaluating teachers based on performance, hastening the eradication of tenure, preventing teachers from working in Illinois if they received two unsatisfactory performance ratings in seven years, making strike criteria onerous, and attacking the workplace rights of collective bargaining and dues check-off for over 200,000 teachers.

Sen. Lightford resisted the moves by House Speaker Madigan and Stand, worried that drastic changes would occur without the involvement of the unions. The trade union leaders in Illinois, like their counterparts in other states, fear nothing less than the loss of status as the official representatives of workers, and the dues and lucrative positions in the bureaucracy that comes with it.

Counterposing the “Performance Counts” legislation, the unions began a compromise with “reform” groups under the

leadership of Lightford, with a plan called “Accountability For All.”

But the “Accountability for All” plan was virtually indistinguishable from the “Performance Counts” plan. The *River City Reader* notes, “[T]he proposals share much common ground in their scopes and basic principles. All recommend new restrictions on teaching certificates based on teacher performance; all recommend that teacher evaluations be a factor in filling new and vacant positions, granting tenure, and determining who gets laid off and recalled; and all recommend a streamlined dismissal process for tenured teachers whose performance is lacking.”

The major unions responded with hostility to the initial plan, not because they opposed the right-wing reforms, but because the plan had not identified the role the unions would play in the process of its implementation. The fulsome support for S.B. 630 from the unions clearly attests to this.

The Senate bill now goes to the House, where it is expected to pass before May 31, with modifications that may impose additional burdens on teachers. Speaker Madigan is well known for his opposition to teacher tenure, having argued for its eradication since the late 1990s.

A *Chicago Tribune* editorial regretted to report that Mayor-elect Emanuel did not get his wish—an outright ban on teachers’ strikes—and that this could be a stumbling block for him as he pushes through deep cuts to the Chicago Public Schools.

On April 15, *Chicago News Cooperative* announced it had uncovered an additional \$100 million deficit in the Chicago Public Schools, and a plan to lay off 2,000 teachers and increase class sizes if a proposed property-tax increase to bridge the budget gap is rejected.



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