

Illinois education “reform” bill passes with bipartisan support

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On Thursday May 12, the House of Representatives in the US state of Illinois passed a reactionary education “reform” bill with overwhelming support from both Democrats and Republicans. Amidst deep cuts in education spending in Illinois and throughout the country, the bill will make it much easier to fire teachers and will effectively eliminate the right to strike.

The bill passed by a margin of 112-1 in the House, with one member voting “present.” In the Senate, it passed 54-0. The attack on teachers is part of a more general attack on public education as a whole. The House voted the same day (by a margin of 102-12) to cut funding for schools throughout the state.

The Obama administration immediately hailed the bill. Education Secretary and former Chicago public schools CEO Arne Duncan called it “truly remarkable,” stressing the support for the measure provided by the trade unions. “Business, unions, educators, advocates and elected officials all came together around a plan that puts children ahead of adults [i.e., attacks teachers] and paves the way for meaningful education reform.” The administration has spearheaded a nation-wide campaign to victimize teachers, close public schools, and expand private charter schools.

All of the major components of the right-wing school reform program embraced by both Democrats and Republicans are included in the bill. It ties layoffs to “performance”—as opposed to seniority—thus eradicating tenure rights. It also allows lower seniority teachers to be called back from being laid off before more senior educators, opening the door for school districts to dump higher-paid veteran teachers in favor of those with less experience. Performance is defined vaguely enough to be essentially arbitrary. School administrators may even give negative evaluations

based on the use of sick days.

Other measures in the bill make tenure harder to achieve and extend the probationary period required of newly hired teachers. The lead time to notify teachers of layoffs is reduced. Local school boards are given extended power to fire tenured teachers, in addition to being able to do so more quickly.

The bill also imposes onerous requirements for Chicago Public Schools teachers to legally strike, through the mandating of lengthy mediation and fact-finding procedures. It raises the bar for a strike vote from a simple majority of votes cast to 75 percent of the membership of the Chicago Teachers Union. Before any such vote could even occur, the CTU would have to give a 10 day notice of its intent to strike. This would be at the end of a 120-day mediation period. Taken together, these measures will in effect take away the right of CPS teachers to strike.

Another measure approved for Chicago allows the Chicago Board of Education to lengthen the school day and year without granting a pay raise.

The House bill also includes changes to the earlier Senate bill. The source of funds for teachers’ pensions will be shifted away from state taxes to local property taxes in school districts. CPS teachers are also removed from even nominal oversight of the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board, extending the autonomy of the Chicago Board of Education and the mayor that appoints its members and its executive.

Democratic Governor Pat Quinn’s spokesperson confirmed last week that the governor supports the bill and expects to sign it into law. Spokesperson Annie Thompson said that “meaningful education reform has been and is one of Gov. Quinn’s top priorities, which is why he supported and why he worked for the passage of Senate Bill 7.”

Chicago's new Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff, also heralded the bill. As a candidate, Emanuel advocated curtailing teachers' right to strike and called on Democratic Speaker of the House Michael Madigan to pass legislation to that effect. In his inaugural address on Monday, Emanuel said he would make education "reform" a top priority.

The *Chicago Sun-Times* quoted Dr. Barbara Radner at DePaul University's Center for Urban Education, who remarked: "[Emanuel]'s just been given the tools he needs from the state to be the education mayor ... in a way [Mayor] Daley was never able to." Daley was given immense power over Chicago Public Schools in 1995, and his Renaissance 2010 plan led to the shutdown of many public schools and their replacement by charter schools. Emanuel's administration will be even more destructive.

The trade unions are entirely complicit in this historic attack on teachers and public education. At a national level, the teachers unions have backed Obama's education policy and have announced their support for his reelection in 2012. In Illinois, the unions were involved in crafting the legislation and gave it their enthusiastic support as it passed the Illinois Senate. They raised hypocritical criticisms of certain aspects of it as it moved through the House, but this was only after teachers voiced outrage at the Senate bill and at the complicity of the teachers' unions in its passage.

The Illinois Education Association and the Chicago Teachers Union worked with right-wing "reform" groups and Democratic and Republican legislators to develop the bill since late 2010. As the House vote neared, the IEA changed its position to neutral.

The IEA explained on its website that its neutral position was due to a technical problem, and reaffirmed its support for the "historic legislation that moves public education forward in Illinois." The CTU's leadership, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), which had been elected by teachers on the basis of its claim to oppose right-wing attacks on education, tried to distance itself from the bill, claiming opposition to certain measures. This is a complete fraud, however, aimed at covering the complicity of the supposed "left" faction in the union in the attack on teachers.

The measures in the Illinois bill are similar to those in other states—like Wisconsin and Florida—pushed by

Republican leaders. In Illinois, the legislation is moved by Democrats, with the participation and support of the teachers' unions, both of which argue for the superiority of this model of "collaboration" as opposed to the confrontational approach taken by Governor Scott Walker and the Republicans in Wisconsin. This is the position of the Obama administration, which worked hand in hand with the UAW to push through unprecedented attacks on autoworkers.

As Duncan put it in reacting to the legislation, "For some time now I have been saying that tough-minded collaboration is more productive than confrontation, and this is the proof." In other words, by ensuring union participation at the outset, when the final product was unveiled teachers were left politically disoriented and unprepared to mount any struggle in opposition to these right-wing bills.

There is immense opposition among teachers to this attack. The passage of this bill makes clear, however, that a successful struggle to defend teachers requires a break with the trade unions and the construction of independent organizations of working class struggle. The defense of public education must be based on the building of an independent political movement of the working class, in opposition to the Democratic and Republican Parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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