

Chicago school officials rescind pay raises for teachers

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The Chicago Board of Education last week unanimously voted to rescind a 4 percent pay raise owed to 30,000 teachers and indicated it would do the same in regard to scheduled raises contained in contracts with other employees of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

The decision is one of the first for the newly installed school board and an opening salvo by the administration of Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel against the jobs and living standards of teachers and other public employees. It also makes clear that the former White House chief of Staff and Wall Street investor plans to escalate the war against public education being spearheaded on the federal level by President Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan.

In line with the campaign of austerity being undertaken by the big business politicians everywhere, CPS officials pointed to an estimated budget deficit of \$712 million for the upcoming year to justify canceling the promised pay increase. The move will save the district an estimated \$100 million.

The gutting of education funding and the attack on teachers is the product of a coordinated campaign by state and city Democratic politicians. The recently passed Illinois budget included a 4 percent cut to local school districts, which in the case of CPS came to \$77 million. Besides the direct cuts, the state also owes CPS around \$300 million in delayed payments, a method the state has used for a number of years to force service providers and government agencies to cut back on services without making any formal decisions.

Another \$364 million of the CPS budget deficit is due to the end of federal funding for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and the Education Jobs Fund. In response to previous cuts and funding shortfalls, CPS relied on this money and other one-time fixes to balance its budget for several years.

In making the case for eliminating the raise, CPS officials immediately sought to portray Chicago teachers as among the most well-paid in the country—a laughable assertion—and have attempted to justify the move by claiming that nearly three quarters of teachers will be receiving raises anyway due to so-called step increases and education level raises.

Most provocative was Emanuel's claim that current labor agreements were the cause of the poor performance of CPS schools. At a press conference, Emanuel said: "Teachers got two types of pay raises. People in public life got labor peace. Can anybody explain to me what the children got? I know what everybody else got...our children got the shaft."

Emanuel has no more concern for the plight of working class students than his predecessor Richard Daley, who oversaw the shutdown of scores of schools, the selling off of public assets to for-profit charter companies and the layoff of thousands of teachers.

The assault on teachers' living standards—under conditions of rising fuel and gas prices—is completely in keeping with the national campaign against public education, which has sought to replace tenure and seniority with "flexible" labor arrangements and merit pay. In fact, Emanuel was a vocal proponent of the reactionary education "reform" bill that was recently

signed into law, which implements much of this agenda in Illinois.

Although Emanuel portrayed the decision as being in the hands of the new school board, the members were all appointed by the mayor, as was new CPS CEO Jean-Claude Brizard. All of the board members and high-level CPS officials were selected for their corporate connections and agreement with the attack on education and educators. Among the new board members are President David Vitale, a former CEO of the Chicago Board of Trade and Vice Chairman and Director of Bank One, and billionaire heiress and school reform proponent Penny Pritzker.

In response to these attacks, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has made it clear it will do nothing to defend teachers. While issuing some verbal complaints about the wiping out of the scheduled pay raise, the CTU said it was willing to hold negotiations on pay, a year before its contract expires.

The CTU supported and was directly involved in drafting the state's school reform legislation that introduces new performance evaluations that will facilitate the firing of teachers and all but eliminates seniority and tenure. By backing the legislation, the union also accepted Emanuel's demand to virtually illegalize any strikes by Chicago teachers (see "Illinois school 'reform' bill passes with bipartisan support").

The CTU and other teachers' unions in Illinois are more than willing to accept the destruction of teachers' living standards and workplace rights as long as their position as partners in this attack is preserved, along with their ability to continue to collect union dues from underpaid and overworked teachers.

The capitulation to Emanuel is a further exposure of the supposed "reform" faction that leads the CTU, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) and its pseudo-left supporters, including CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, who is a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (see article: "The ISO and the betrayal of the Chicago teachers").

This is only the beginning of the attack. In an article

appearing in the *Chicago Tribune*, Barbara Radner of DePaul University's Center for Urban Education, linked the rescinding of the pay raises to the new bill and indicated it would be a first step in an overhaul of teacher pay. "They're doing a whole redo of the system. They put a cap on salaries, saying there will be no raises this year. Next up they will be introducing merit pay."

Given the CTU's complicity in the passage of the law that allows merit pay and its agreement with the demand that the working class must pay for budget shortfalls, its participation in reopened negotiations will only result in sweeping setbacks for teachers. This can only be resisted through mobilizing teachers, parents and students independently of the unions and waging a struggle to defend the right to public education against the Democrats and the profit system that both big business parties defend.



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