

West Chicago teachers strike

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6 February 2013

Classes were canceled Monday for West Chicago Schools, where teachers have gone on strike for the first time in over 60 years. Talks broke down Sunday between the West Chicago School District 33 and the Elementary Teachers Association of West Chicago (ETAWC), when the district stated it would only discuss negotiating teacher healthcare premiums if teachers accepted concessions in salary, work conditions, and retirement benefits.

The 284 teachers have been without a contract since August 2012. Intent to strike was filed on December 21 of last year.

ETAWC union negotiator Mary Catherine Kosmach has clarified the union's intent to meet the district's demands and settle the dispute as quickly as possible. Negotiations resumed this afternoon.

"No one wanted a strike," Kosmach said. "We are available at any time to meet with the board and continue the process that will eventually lead to an agreement."

ETAWC has already conceded a one-year wage freeze. The West Chicago district demands that teachers in addition forfeit their ability to move up the step and ladder system, where teachers are given raises depending on seniority and additional teaching credentials. On top of that, the board wants teachers to pay higher insurance premiums and to sacrifice their retirement benefits. No word has been given on a *quid pro quo* drop in classroom sizes or other improvements to working conditions.

The West Chicago teachers are affiliated to the National Education Association, the very first trade union to endorse the re-election of President Obama, whose administration has overseen an unprecedented attack on the public education system in the US, under the guise of "reform."

More than 4,000 students in eight schools are affected by the strike in six elementary schools, a middle school,

and a preschool. The West Chicago district faces a \$1.4 million deficit for this fiscal year and predicts the deficit to increase to about \$3.5 million next year.

West Chicago has the lowest per capita income in DuPage County, one of the five suburban counties surrounding the city of Chicago, where the rates of foreclosure, household poverty and food insecurity are some of the highest in Illinois.

To compensate for the budget deficit, the West Chicago school district has spent money meant for classroom education to cover other costs which have increased. ETAWC states, "Our district's transportation expenses are considerably higher than other districts, and the district has chosen to transfer money from the Education Fund to subsidize transportation costs."

Union leaders have boasted they are more efficient at putting together an austerity contract than the school board is. Kosmach stated, "The teachers association has proposed a package that would save the district more money than what the district has on the table."

As Kosmach made clear, ETAWC never intended to mount any fight against the cuts. Throughout the previous 17 months of negotiations, ETAWC has agreed to repeated concessions, including cuts to salaries, retirement benefits, and health care premiums. The difficulty ETAWC faces now is in pushing through even more cuts without losing control of angry and exhausted teachers.

In response to the concessions offered by the ETAWC, school board member David Barclay said, "What the teachers have proposed is still out of line with other districts." The union and the school board are playing off of each other for the cheapest possible contract teachers will have to vote on, while trying to appear as though they are two opposed forces.

Not only is the West Chicago district and ETAWC using each other in this way, they are also using the

teachers from other districts against the West Chicago teachers. Workers in every district are told they must accept deep cuts, just as the workers in other areas have, thus creating a perpetual race to the bottom facilitated by the unions.

The strike follows the path of defeat laid by the leaderships of the Chicago teachers, the Evergreen Park teachers, and other suburban districts striking in opposition to austerity contracts, school closures and deteriorating conditions. Each strike has ended with the teachers unions successfully pushing through austerity contracts by insisting they want nothing more than an agreement, while repeating the lie that there is no money for public education.



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