

Chicago announces plans to shut 61 public schools

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23 March 2013

In the face of mass opposition, the city of Chicago, Illinois announced plans to close 61 public schools after the close of the school year, affecting 30,000 students. About one thousand teaching positions will be moved or eliminated. The closure of 13 percent of public schools amounts to one of the largest mass school closings in US history.

When the list of closings was announced on Thursday night, parents, teachers and students expressed outrage with many organizing spontaneous protests Friday afternoon.

The nation's third largest school district, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has a total of 681 schools. The announcement follows the plans to shut 26 public schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and 15 public schools in the nation's capital, Washington, DC. Detroit, Michigan has closed 130 schools since 2005, including 40 in 2010, and has plans to close another 28.

These closings are part of Obama's administration's program of "school reform," which is aimed at victimizing teachers, shutting down public schools and privatizing education through the expansion of charter schools.

Thursday's announcement was made by CPS CEO Barbara Byrd Bennett, appointed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, President Obama's former chief of staff. A total of 54 elementary and middle schools will be closed outright. A number of other schools will be "co-located," meaning that multiple schools will be combined under one roof.

Another six schools will be designated as "turnaround" schools, which means that the entire faculty and staff will be fired. A CPS board vote supposedly to finalize the list is scheduled in May.

The majority of the schools being closed are located in the south and west side of Chicago, some of the

poorest areas of the city. The safety of children is one of the main concerns of parents and teachers, since children will be forced to walk longer distances, including through impoverished areas with higher levels of gang violence.

As with school closures throughout the country, the Emanuel administration is seeking to justify its assault on public education by claiming there is no money to maintain them, and that the public schools are "underutilized" due to falling student enrollment.

According to the city, the school district has a projected deficit of about \$1 billion, due primarily to the underfunding of pensions over the past four years. CPS anticipates that the shut down of schools will actually cost about \$233 million, to be paid by issuing municipal bonds, eventually reducing spending by \$560 million over a ten-year period.

By comparison, the state of Illinois' 13 billionaires have a combined net worth of more than \$25 billion, about 45 times the anticipated savings that would come from the closings. Included in this list is Penny Pritzker, heiress to the Hyatt hotel fortune, a close confidant of Emanuel and a likely choice of the Obama administration for US Commerce Secretary.

As for the claim of "underutilization," in reality class sizes are too large according to recent studies documenting overcrowding in CPS. The district also uses the unusually high criteria of 31 students per classroom to determine full utilization. In any case, the argument is a self-fulfilling prophecy: the starving of resources to neighborhoods and local schools serves to drive students out. This in turn is used to justify more school closings and the diversion of even more public resources to for-profit charters.

The mass shutdown of schools in Chicago has been facilitated by the Chicago Teachers Union, which

betrayed last September's strike by 26,000 teachers—bowing to the demands of the Emanuel administration. During the walkout CTU officials explicitly said they were prohibited from demanding an end to school closings, pointing to a state law, which the union itself promoted, that limited negotiations to wage and benefit issues.

The three-year contract agreed to by the CTU gave principals the right to hire and fire teachers, including terminating non-tenured teachers immediately and dismissing tenured teachers after a year. It also accepted the lengthening of the school day and year without additional compensation, and the expanded use of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations. These measures were designed to facilitate school closings.

Seeking to contain public anger, the CTU and its president Karen Lewis and vice president, Jesse Sharkey, a member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, have postured as opponents of the school closings. (See, "CTU president denies opposing school closures") CTU has planned a protest on March 27, to let parents, teachers and students blow off steam, while it continues to work behind the scenes with the school board.

The CTU supports the closings but wants to be a partner in the process. This was made clear by Lewis during the strike, when she told the *Chicago Tribune*, "We understand the whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively. We either do this together in some reasonable way or we will always be fighting."

Lewis reiterated this point in a Friday interview on Chicago Public Radio, making clear the union is not opposed to the closings but only the way they were being carried out. When asked directly whether she opposes all school closures, she responded, "You know what, that is not even a real argument. The issue that we need to talk about is this outrageous number of schools and the fact that nothing has been done to prepare people appropriately for anything of this measure."

To a great extent, the main concern of the CTU bureaucracy is that it benefit from the profits that will be made from the carve-up of the public school system. Earlier this month, the CTU announced that they had reached a deal with UNO, the largest charter school company, to collect dues from underpaid charter school

teachers who will be forced to join the CTU's sister union, Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (ACTS).

The ruling class and both big business parties are waging a ruthless campaign to dismantle public education. Since coming to office, the Obama administration has overseen the shutdown of an estimated 4,000 schools and the destruction of more than 300,000 teachers' jobs.

The right to public education is incompatible with the continued existence of a system in which society's wealth is concentrated in the hands of such a tiny segment of the population. The corporate and financial elite is thoroughly hostile to the egalitarian and democratic principles embodied in public education.

Throughout the country, there is growing opposition to the destruction of public education. At meetings to discuss the closings, the Socialist Equality Party has called on teachers, parents and students to form action committees—independent of the unions and the Democratic Party—to fight the closures and mobilize the entire working class in defense of public education.

The SEP opposes all school closings and is fighting for a vast increase in funding for public education, paid for, to start, by sharply increasing the taxes on the wealthy. This struggle must be bound up with a political offensive against the Democratic and Republican Parties and the capitalist profit system they defend.



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