

Chicago Public Schools announces more than 2,100 additional layoffs

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Chicago Public Schools announced the layoff of over 2,113 staff Thursday evening, while principals called employees with notification that they had been laid off Friday morning. Of the 2,113 staff laid off, 1,036 are teachers, or 4 percent of the previous year's instructional staff. The other 1,077 are support staff—teacher assistants, lunchroom workers, security guards, and instructional aides.

The loss of staff, mass school closures, and budget reductions at each school altogether represent an enormous attack on public education in Chicago that is being led by Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Democratic Party.

When the new school year begins, 50 neighborhood middle and elementary schools will be closed—the largest school closures in American history. Students will be forced to travel outside of their neighborhood and potentially across gang lines, putting their safety at risk.

They will be packed into more crowded learning environments at the same time that resources and staffing are cut. The present announcement of 2,113 layoffs was preceded in June by the layoff of 855 staff, including 545 teachers, as a result of the school closures. In May, 550 probationary appointed teachers were let go.

For the remaining schools, CPS is implementing a new budgeting system that gives schools a set amount of money per student, rather than the old system, which funded a fixed number of positions per school and paid for most supplies, while setting a portion for principals to spend at their discretion. The consequence is that each school faces budget cuts of 10 to 25 percent, resulting in the elimination of teachers' aides, health workers, and other employees, as well as cuts to spending on supplies.

CPS cites a need to cut costs owing to a \$1 billion budget deficit, which they claim is largely due to increasing pension costs. Across the country, the threat of financial catastrophe is being used to justify deep austerity.

On Thursday, Detroit's unelected Emergency Financial Manager Kevyn Orr placed the city in bankruptcy, the largest such municipal bankruptcy in history. A major goal of the proceedings is to gut the pensions of 31,000 retired and active city workers, with proposals to pay as little as 10 cents on the dollar to retirees who have given a lifetime of work.

In Illinois, state Democrats have competing plans for pension cuts that will pursue similar cuts to the living standards of both retired and current workers. CPS states the failure of the state to implement them has led to its current budget crisis.

The school closures and layoffs in Chicago are the policy of the Democratic Party on a national scale, with the Obama administration pushing for "reform" based on school privatization and attacks on teachers. The same day that CPS announced 2,113 layoffs, Michelle Obama spoke in Chicago at a privately funded career training program led by Mayor Emanuel's, wife Amy Rule.

The unions seek an organizational role in these new educational structures, while working to contain the anger of rank-and-file teachers over the destruction of public education. In Chicago, the largest charter school network, UNO, is unionized by an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers. The continuing mass layoffs at CPS would not be possible without the crucial assistance of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and their supporters in the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO).

The path was cleared for Emanuel to announce the

largest mass school closings in US history by the CTU, which shut down last year's strike by 26,000 teachers in order to prevent it from developing into a political fight against Emanuel and Barack Obama's school "reform" agenda of replacing public schools with for-profit charters. The CTU called off the strike without any provision against school closures or layoffs, with CTU President Karen Lewis stating it was an "austerity" contract necessitated by "tough economic times."

Lewis and Vice-President Jesse Sharkey, a leading ISO member, were also well aware that the "recall provision" in the new contract would do nothing to prevent the layoffs. The provision, which mandates that half of the teachers employed by the district be formerly laid-off CPS teachers, only allows teachers laid off due to school closings to follow students to their new schools if there are "available positions."

The ability of CPS to fire tenured teachers was a gain won by Emanuel after the strike—and is a centerpiece of President Obama's "Race to the Top" program. The CTU agreed to a new teacher evaluation system, where 75 percent of teacher ratings in the first year are based on principals' observations, and the remaining 25 percent come from standardized tests. This allows veteran teachers to be targeted for victimization and removal, including teachers who show they oppose attacks on public education.

Since May, CPS has laid off 3,500 teachers and staff. The CTU's press release on the most recent layoffs merely suggests to the notoriously corrupt Democratic city council where it might find money to help the budget. Otherwise, the union is also pursuing discrimination suits in court that allege that the school closings violate the Americans with Disabilities Act by negatively impacting special education students and the Illinois Civil Rights Act because a disproportionately large number of students are black.

At all times, the CTU avoids mention of the Democratic Party and political issues at stake in the fight to defend public education, making it clear that it will not and cannot lead a fight against school closures and layoffs. The defense of public education requires a break with the trade unions and Democratic Party, and the building of new rank-and-file organizations based on an international fight against the policies of austerity and war.



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