

After privatization of custodial services

Reports of garbage, vermin in Chicago public schools

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Recently published reports and testimony by Chicago Public Schools faculty and parents document increasingly filthy conditions in city schools following the privatization of custodial services earlier this year by contract firm Aramark. The city, backed by the SEIU union that nominally represents the janitors, nonetheless plans to proceed with the layoff of 290 custodians at the end of the month.

Since the privatization of custodial services by Aramark and Sodexo earlier in the year, parents and CPS principals have complained about deterioration in the conditions of school facilities. For teachers, cleaning and maintaining the schools has taken up time that should be spent on instruction. CPS principals report resorting to organizing parent and student volunteers to help clean and dispose of overflowing trash before the start of the 2014-15 school year.

Veteran teachers say current conditions are the most unsanitary they have ever seen. They report having to purchase, out of their own paychecks, basic amenities for student use in school restrooms such as hand soap and toilet paper. Flies, gnats, and roaches are proliferating amid piles of unremoved garbage, they say. One parent testified at a CPS Board of Education meeting that a classroom rug on which a student vomited on a Friday afternoon had remained uncleaned the following Monday.

Photographs of Chicago school facilities posted online by students and teachers, some uploaded to Twitter under the hashtag '#CPSfilth', include images of unsanitary restrooms, piles of garbage, dead rodents, broken utilities, moldy cafeteria food, and other stark indications of uncleanliness and neglect.

One high school teacher working on Chicago's

southwest side reported his classroom has a leaky ceiling that had gone unfixed for two years, and that roaches were recently spotted in a student locker room, causing students to avoid using the showers after physical education class.

"It's gross and disgusting and my health is being affected," one teacher remarked. "I want to be outside the minute I'm in here. It smells. Everything smells and I can't focus. If I can't focus to teach, how can kids focus to learn?"

Teachers also pointed to CPS students being fed unhealthy and sometimes spoiled and unsanitary food for school lunches. A teacher at a south side elementary school who chose to remain anonymous told the Huffington Post that children over the previous school year were repeatedly served rotten apples, spoiled broccoli and moldy bread. Aramark is also responsible for operating the food service in Chicago public schools.

One teacher told Huffington Post, "I'm so nervous these kids will get sick...It breaks my heart because these are kids at our school that in general we know are going home and not getting food at home. They're getting kind of junk for a meal."

The prevalence of filth in CPS facilities first emerged following a survey of CPS principals and administrators on school conditions that was conducted by a research group operating as an extension of the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association. Separately, a Chicago Teachers Union survey conducted in June and another survey conducted by the parent school advocacy group Raise Your Hand identified similar conditions of unclean facilities and neglected maintenance.

Parents, teachers, and members of the principals' association voiced outrage and shared testimony about these horrific conditions at the September 24 Chicago Board of Education meeting. Aramark representatives, CPS officials, and SEIU Local 1 union heads offered no explanation, nor did they back off the layoff plans. All three parties reiterated their support for the March privatization of CPS custodial work.

The filthy conditions and deterioration in Chicago Public Schools facilities are a direct outcome of the draconian budget cuts to Chicago Public Schools and the mass privatization of the CPS custodial services implemented in the wake of the defeat of the 2012 Chicago teachers strike and the closure of 49 Chicago public schools by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a Democrat and close ally of President Obama.

Last March, CPS awarded \$340 million to two companies to privatize the majority of the school system's custodial staffing. For Aramark \$260 million was doled out to take over the training, supervision and management of custodians for all but 33 schools, while \$80 million was separately awarded to a partnership between Magic Johnson Enterprises and services firm Sodexo to run a pilot program in the remaining 33 schools.

CPS officials claimed that the March contract privatizing custodial services would improve the cleanliness of CPS facilities and save the school district between \$40 and \$54 million over a three-year period. Already, CPS has claimed that the district has saved \$50 million through cutting custodial positions, reducing spending on supplies, and rolling back overtime hours.

In mid-September Aramark announced 490 custodians would lose their jobs at CPS. Two weeks later, amid revelations of dirty and unsafe facilities, the city and Aramark appeared to pull back on some of the layoffs after the SEIU Local 1 president Tom Balanoff colluded with the Emanuel administration in a supposed "face-saving" agreement. The union then alerted the janitors via automated phone call that 178 senior custodians would be allowed to keep their jobs on a semi-permanent basis, while the remaining 290 janitors would be laid off at the end of October.

In reality, SEIU Local 1, the union representing CPS custodians, has been complicit with Aramark and the Emanuel administration from the beginning. It

defended the legitimacy of the March privatization, and has been indifferent to the unsanitary conditions in the schools. There is no reason to doubt that it coordinated the janitorial layoffs from the beginning.

In a remarkable statement, Balanoff hailed the reduction in custodian layoffs as a victory and praised the new Aramark management regime, claiming it will help custodians "be able to maintain the level of cleanliness needed."

Speaking on the March contract, Balanoff offered only further praise and illusions in the Aramark privatization. "We would prefer to see no layoffs anywhere and see everybody have good paying, full-time jobs," he said in late September. "But again, we do think with the technology Aramark's brought in and the readjustment on the number of janitors, we think that we will be able to maintain a good level of cleanliness in the schools."

This, even as the shameful images of vermin and garbage in schools emerged.



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