

Waukegan, Illinois teachers' strike enters third week

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The strike of twelve hundred teachers in the Chicago suburb of Waukegan entered its third week on Monday, October 20. Negotiations between the Waukegan Community Unit School District, the second largest employer in the city, and the Waukegan Teachers Council—Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) Local 504—have repeatedly broken down over pay and health care coverage.

The district wants teachers to pay significantly more for health coverage in exchange for a pay raise that does not keep up with inflation. In other words, the teachers are to take a de facto pay cut. Another major point of contention is the extremely unequal ratio of administrator to teacher pay. School board members Dr. Donaldo Batiste, Dr. Mary Lamping and Anita Hanna are reported to receive well over \$200,000 per year in compensation. Starting pay for Waukegan teachers, in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the country, is a little over \$37,000.

The IFT says negotiations went on for four months before the district gave its written proposal on September 18, nearly one month after the start of classes in August. The Waukegan district reportedly has a current budget surplus of \$37 million.

The striking teachers are broadly supported throughout the area and many parents and students have joined their picket lines or donated money to support them. About 50 miles north of Chicago, Waukegan is a predominantly working class community. Hard hit by the shutdown of factories in the area its population rebounded in the 1990s, largely due to an influx of Latin American immigrants.

Two-thirds of the district's 17,000 public school students qualify for free or reduced price meals due to the large number of low-income households.

At an October 14 school board meeting, teachers and

parents took issue with the board's arrogant treatment of teachers, its refusal to negotiate and the risks posed to children by the district's move to reduce teaching to a low-paying job. Parents and students criticized the taxpayer-funded \$285-per-hour attorney the board has hired to represent it. No school board members have been directly involved in contract negotiations.

The IFT, and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, however, have isolated the strike, which is presently one of the few teachers strikes still going on in the US. Some 30,000 Chicago teachers are only miles away but the Chicago Teachers Union and other unions have left the Waukegan teachers to fight alone.

Teachers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the picket line expressed their determination. Ryan, an art teacher with seven years in Waukegan schools, said, "The district has been trying to sway public opinion against us. They have an auto-dialer to make calls to all parents. Simply put, they call parents and are presenting straight lies. They also have misinformation on the district website. Despite that, we feel like the community is really on board. They know what we are fighting for is better education for their children."

"We've seen a pattern that the board will not negotiate contracts until the school year starts, so every year negotiations continue into the school year. I've worked here seven years, and for three of them, there was no raise or new steps up in pay grade. In that time, the school went from a \$10 million deficit to a \$37 million surplus. Yet they are demanding we accept no raise, when inflation is considered, and pay \$600 a year for health insurance.

"Another issue we have is that we want the ability to choose our own curriculum for professional development. We get in-service days of training that

really don't help our own growth, so we want to be able to pick development that will provide something more meaningful to our work with students."

In a provocative attempt to force teachers to capitulate, the district canceled their health insurance after the strike began October 2. At least two teachers in the district are undergoing cancer treatment, which they will have to pay themselves.

Thomas Allen explained his situation, "I have what could be my final chemotherapy treatment, which out-of-pocket will cost \$36,000. The doctors want to perform a CT scan to see if there is still a trace of the disease in my system—at a cost of about \$15,000. You can't put a price on health, but \$50,000 is a tremendous financial burden."

The Illinois Federation of Teachers is well aware that the strike directly raises political issues, above all the relentless assault on public education being spearheaded by the Obama administration and both big business parties in the name of "school reform." The union is anxious to wrap up the struggle as quickly as possible so it does not interfere with the reelection campaign of Democratic governor Pat Quinn. The IFT is backing the deeply unpopular governor, who has attacked state worker pensions and supported Obama's pro-corporate education agenda.

Waukegan Mayor Wayne Motley has asked Governor Quinn and AFT officials to intervene and settle the strike, saying to the *News Sun* that the school year cannot extend past June 30, meaning the strike would need to end immediately.

This has not been such an easy task for the union, however, because of the strong resistance of teachers to the district's demands. This has forced the AFT to beg the district for some kind of cosmetic concession so it could sell an agreement to its members. Waukegan Teachers Council President Kathy Schwarz said, "There would be no point in caving into demands that our members on the line wouldn't accept. All that would do is delay the process even further because if it were voted down, we would be back at square one with the District. The Board must know this. We need the Board to come back to the table with a substantive proposal that recognizes the dedication and service of our teachers. The public showed that they understand this, we need the Board to listen to the voices of the community it serves."

Franklin, a school counselor, said, "I believe they are trying to diminish the profession of teachers, and teachers are workers. They want more control over us. They use evaluations as a method of intimidation, and to put fear into teachers and threaten them with the loss of employment and benefits.

"They are proposing that we pay \$600 a year for health insurance, while administrators pay nothing for health care, and get funding for cell phones and get a free car.

"Under the Obama administration, funding was supposed to come to train teachers and provide us with professional development. We haven't seen it, but our principal did brag that he got \$7,000 to renovate his office."

The three-year contract agreed to in 2011 covered the school years 2012-2014, and expired in June of this year. It implemented the permanent job reductions outlined in the bipartisan Illinois Senate Bill 7, which both the IFT and Illinois Education Association negotiated with the Stand for Children lobby group, and other anti-teacher agencies.

Robin, a high school teacher, spoke to the inequality characterizing public education, "National funding is unequal, with rich and poor districts getting different funding. They are doing away with equal access to education. We really need to have people value education so that all kids have equal access and supplies. You have teachers here who spend large amounts out of pocket to supply their classrooms and to provide rewards and incentives, including recognizing a student's achievement when their family can't.

"Yet these teachers are earning \$25,000 less than other districts in the area. I worked with an intern here who was bilingual and from Waukegan, which helped a lot with her connection to students. But a nearby district, with a much smaller Hispanic population, offered \$15,000 more. We often lose talented young teachers because of this, because they can't afford rent or the cost of transportation."



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