

Chicago Public Schools announces 1,000 layoffs, threatens new cuts

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Chicago Public Schools (CPS) unveiled a \$5.4 billion budget on Monday, just days after having announced 1,000 layoffs on August 5. The layoffs affect about 500 teachers and 500 teaching assistants and support staff. The announcement comes amid a protracted 13-month Illinois state budget crisis in which universities, state and social service agencies and health providers have been forced to cut offerings, and in some cases, close altogether.

In the sixth week of the fiscal year, and less than one month from the opening of the school year, CPS officials only this week presented their budget to the public. For many months the school district has claimed a deficit of more than \$1 billion, which is used to try to force teachers, students and families to accept ever greater cuts to education and staffing as the district's debt payments soar.

This year's budget is \$232 million less than last year's and covers a \$300 million shortfall arising from recent stopgap funding legislation, CPS officials stated. While declaring it the first "balanced" budget the district has put forward in many years, two sources of the hundreds of millions in funding it includes have not materialized yet: a seven percent de facto cut in teacher pay—based in an overhaul of pensions that forces teachers to pay directly into the fund themselves—and funding from the state of Illinois.

The budget indicates there are 1,268 fewer total positions in the school district this year compared with last year, including 766 fewer teachers and 405 fewer nurses, custodians and support staff.

Another major round of cuts is expected if the state, led by former private equity mogul and billionaire Republican Governor Bruce Rauner, does not provide \$215 million to its largest school district. CPS CEO Forrest Claypool threatened that additional cuts will

impact classrooms if the teachers do not accept concessions they turned down earlier this year.

Conditions are so desperate in many schools that any additional cuts would be intolerable to teachers and students. Since Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel privatized janitorial service in 2014, schools have become dangerously filthy and neglected and dilapidated structures go unrepaired.

It is already a long-standing practice for teachers and staff to spend substantial sums of their own money to provide basic amenities like paper towels, soap, pens, paper, markers and other learning materials. In recent months, several schools have held fundraisers and some have partnered with local businesses to help make up drastic funding shortfalls. School athletics coaches are using crowdfunding web sites like GoFundMe to cover the program costs in addition to taking donations from parents and other institutions.

A series of public hearings on the budget are scheduled for mid-August, with several scheduled during midday hours, making it virtually impossible for working parents who want to oppose the cuts to attend.

Mass layoffs have become a routine event in recent years, taking place in the weeks just before the school year begins and creating a panicked atmosphere in schools and among teachers. This speaks not only to the ruthlessness of the Democratic city administration but also to the total complicity of the Chicago Teachers Union, which has overseen the gutting of the school district, including the closure of 50 elementary schools, and the proliferation of several charter school networks.

The district's 27,000 teachers have been working without a contract since July 1, 2015. In April the CTU called a one-day stunt strike to promote illusions that Mayor Emanuel and the state Democrats could be relied on to increase funding and protect pensions.

The next month it was revealed that the CTU officials had given their pledge not to strike to city and school authorities even as they were telling members a strike was possible. The union's sham "plan" to move to strike was revealed by none other than Emanuel himself and made public just two days prior to a May 4 vote by union delegates on whether or not to call a strike.

The CTU announced last week that its leaders had begun a fresh round of negotiations on August 1. Just five days later, the district announced the 1,000 layoffs. In a typically duplicitous pair of remarks, Karen Lewis was quoted on the CTU Twitter account August 8, saying, "If the Board of Education moves to impose a seven percent cut in our salary, we will move to strike." A few minutes later, she was reported by CTU's Twitter to have said, "There are no plans currently in place to strike, but our members will NOT go another year without a contract."

Acting as a junior partner in the Emanuel administration, CTU has worked systematically to block any struggle against the mayor's cuts, while rising anger among teachers and other sections of the working class threatens to burst out into the open. Back in January, another of the union's plans was blown, when details of a concessions contract were leaked that CTU president Karen Lewis had hailed as a "serious offer." That agreement included the seven percent pay cut demanded by Emanuel for pensions, as well as health care cost hikes. Facing angry teachers who openly expressed their opposition to the union-backed plan on social media, the CTU bargaining team was forced to turn down the agreement.

Last year, in emphasizing the "seriousness" of the budget crisis, the union leadership—which includes Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization—stated teachers were willing to accept a pay freeze. In an appeal to Emanuel, CTU even put forth its own proposed school funding plan this year, which included gas and other transportation tax hikes that would hit working people. The union makes these reactionary proposals at a time when Illinois is home to around 18 billionaires and many tens of thousands of millionaires. Meanwhile the working population sits second lowest in the nation, just after Nevada, for personal income recovery coming out of the 2008 crash.

Teachers, parents and students face a turning point in

the fight to defend public education, a social right that continues to be targeted for spending cuts across the country. This assault, which has been spearheaded by the Obama administration, will be escalated following the November presidential vote, no matter which candidate is elected.

Public education and the rights of teachers will not be defended by the CTU. If the CTU were to call a strike at some point, it would be aimed at putting on a show of opposition before forcing through concessions—just as it did during the betrayal of the 2012 strike. To defend public education teachers must advance their fight through their own independent organizations of struggle, and appeal to workers in all sectors to join in a common fight against the Democratic and Republican parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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