

Rockford, Illinois public school employees set to strike next week

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Nine hundred bus drivers, paraprofessionals and food service workers for the Rockford Public Schools (RPS) are set to strike on March 15 if a new contract is not reached before then between RPS and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31. Rockford, about 90 miles northwest of Chicago, has the third largest school district in the state with 28,500 students.

In January, the RPS school board unilaterally imposed a new contract, which included a sharp spike in health insurance costs and paltry wage increases. Under the contract bus drivers start at \$14.00 an hour, food service workers start at \$9.91 an hour, and paraprofessionals start at \$10.63 an hour.

While RPS workers are determined to fight against the attacks on their livelihoods—having overwhelmingly voted to strike—AFSCME officials are limiting the action to a three-day strike to blow off steam and curtail a growing combativeness to wage a struggle. In the meantime, union officials are doing everything to get some deal to sell workers to prevent a strike altogether.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a Rockford Public School bus driver with five years of service said, “Basically the wage increase we were given isn’t enough to offset the higher costs for insurance. Bus drivers carry a great deal of responsibility for minimum pay. We haul precious cargo, children! Men and women get paid more to haul garbage than what we receive to haul children. There is something wrong!”

“It’s not a job that meets the needs of someone trying to raise a family. I have a second job. There’s no way I could live off what bus drivers make. It’s exhausting. I need a job with insurance but the pay is so low I have no other choice but to work another job.”

She further added a “majority of the bus drivers favor an indefinite strike.” While a three-day strike would

reduce financial hardship on drivers, she said, if an agreement is not reached before, during or soon thereafter the strike, the “next course of action will be an open-ended strike.”

While trying to put out a fire in Rockford, AFSCME officials are also trying to prevent the first statewide strike by Illinois public employees. The state’s Republican governor, multi-millionaire Bruce Rauner, has unilaterally imposed a concessions-laden contract on 38,000 state employees who voted 81 percent to strike. The governor threatened to call out the National Guard in the event of a walkout, openly comparing himself to President Reagan who fired 11,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981.

In addition, thousands of Caterpillar workers, largely concentrated in Illinois, have approved a strike action though the United Auto Workers has forced them to stay on the job past the expiration of their contract. The conditions are growing for a possible “Wisconsin moment,” i.e., when tens of thousands of workers descended upon Madison, Wisconsin in 2011 to protest Governor Scott Walker’s anti-worker measures before the unions and the Democrats strangled that movement.

AFSCME, the Illinois Education Association and the other unions, which are aligned with the Democratic Party, reject any struggle to unite the working class against the relentless austerity measures imposed by both big business parties. The only concern of the union executives is that they have a “seat at the table” to protect their own financial and institutional interests.

The proposed three-day strike is aimed at releasing pent up anger and deluding workers into believing the union is really fighting for them. Whether AFSCME reaches a deal before a walkout or one quickly afterwards, however, it will serve the interests of the corporations and their political servants, not the needs

of public employees.

Workers want to fight. In opposition to the efforts by AFSCME and other unions to isolate and suffocate the struggle, RPS workers must take the conduct of the fight into their own hands. They should elect independent committees, controlled democratically by rank-and-file workers, to reach out to Illinois state workers, Caterpillar workers, Rockford teachers, parents and students to wage a common fight to defend the living standards and social rights of all workers.



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