

Rockford, Illinois public school employees go on strike

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A three-day strike is underway by 900 bus drivers, paraprofessionals and food service workers for the Rockford Public Schools (RPS). Contract negotiations between RPS and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31 failed to produce a new agreement before the strike deadline Wednesday at midnight. The strike, launched yesterday, is expected to be called off tomorrow by AFSCME officials.

Negotiations over a new contract between the school district and AFSCME began in June 2016, when the previous contract expired. Rockford, which is located 90 miles northwest of Chicago, has the third-largest school district in the state of Illinois with 28,500 students.

From the eyes of the AFSCME bureaucracy, the purpose of the three-day strike is not to mount any kind of struggle against the RPS administration, let alone the Republicans and Democrats who are imposing austerity throughout the state, but to allow workers to blow off steam. The union is seeking to buy more time to reach a sellout deal with RPS while it seeks to use the strike to delude workers into believing AFSCME is fighting in their interests.

The strike is a definite expression of a growing and determined combativeness among RPS workers. Waging a fight against the growing attacks against their livelihoods is no longer a question, but a necessity. But such defiance will not be tolerated by AFSCME. Behind the backs of workers, the union is conspiring with local politicians to impose the bulk of management's demands.

The RPS school board in January foisted upon RPS workers a new contract that included a huge increase in health insurance costs and paltry wage increases amounting to poverty wages. Under the imposed

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.

According to AFSCME, before the imposed contract, the average annual pay for a bus driver was \$16,181, for a paraprofessional it was \$14,280 and \$11,373 for a food service worker.

Posturing as a determined opponent of these demands, AFSCME Council 31 representative Ed Sadlowski declared, "School board members seem to think it's OK to pay poverty wages, 14 or 16,000 dollars a year. The board members seem to think it's OK to raise workers' costs for health care, putting health insurance out of reach for many workers."

Donna Henderson, president of AFSCME Local 692, whose membership includes RPS paraprofessionals, said of the imposed contract, "We need fair wages so we are able to pay our bills. Right now, a lot of us qualify for food stamps and other government assistance. It's not fair for the board to demand so much from us when we are some of the lowest-paid employees in the district."

The poverty wages of the RPS workers were negotiated and implemented by the AFSCME leadership in the previous contract in 2013, which AFSCME officials hailed as a "fair contract."

AFSCME, like the United Auto Workers, AFL-CIO and other unions, are allied with the Democratic Party. During the eight years of the Obama administration, hundreds of thousands of school employees lost their jobs, while Obama's Race to the Top program was used to expand charter schools, siphon off money from public education and to attack the wages and benefits of teachers and other school employees. In Chicago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel has spearheaded the attack on public education, closing scores of schools and

funneling millions to private charter operators.

At the same time, Republican Governor Bruce Rauner is carrying out a frontal assault on tens of thousands of state workers. AFSCME officials have repeatedly blocked any fight by state workers despite the overwhelming support for a strike by rank-and-file workers.

The struggle for good-paying jobs, affordable and high-quality health care, and a secure retirement, places the striking RPS workers in irreconcilable conflict with the RPS administration, both big-business parties and AFSCME.

Rockford workers must take the fight into their own hand by establishing rank-and-file committees, independent of AFSCME and both big-business parties. RPS workers should call upon and unite with Illinois state workers, Caterpillar workers, Rockford and Chicago teachers, parents and students to wage a common struggle to fight for the living standards and social rights of all workers.



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