

Chicago school district moves to fire activist teacher

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Last month Sarah Chambers, a special education teacher at Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy in Chicago, was suspended from her position for allegedly violating state and city school board policies. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has confirmed it is moving to fire her, but more than one month after her suspension the specific allegations against her are still not public.

The administration of Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel is aiming to make an example of Chambers, who has vocally opposed cuts to special education and the use of high-stakes testing, to intimidate and silence teachers, as well as students and parents, who oppose education cuts and privatization. As of this writing, more than 3,800 have signed a petition to reinstate the teacher and a rally was held to call for her defense. Leading officials from the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) were noticeably absent from the event, though Chambers is a member of the union's executive board.

Other high-profile teacher activists have been targeted for firing by CPS in recent years, including Principal Troy LaRaviere in 2016. In 2011, seven of the 30 teachers at Austin Polytechnical were dismissed and blacklisted for organizing opposition to the closure of their school.

Speaking to the local CBS affiliate, Chambers said she received an email in the first days of April accusing her of encouraging a student to opt out of the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) standardized tests that are required of students from third through eighth grade and throughout high school. Since 2014, teachers nationwide, including other teachers at Saucedo in Chicago, have participated in standardized testing boycotts though only Chambers appears to have been targeted by CPS.

She said, "I was in complete and utter shock. I mean,

I'm a distinguished teacher. I've been rated distinguished by all six principals I've had. I've never been written up in my life. They wouldn't even tell me in person.

"There's really an attack against me, because I'm an outspoken union activist, and especially an outspoken special education advocate. They cut special education by \$80 million at least this year alone, and it's really hurting our students. I've spoken at the Board of Education, and brought parents and students to speak at the Board of Education, and frankly they want teachers to be silent. You know, they want them to follow their orders, and I can't be silent, because it hurts my students with disabilities."

Over the last decade, CPS has made cuts of hundreds of millions of dollars to special education. In 2015, a funding formula change was implemented to sharply reduce special education staffing levels. The district has also moved to limit the number of students identified as having special needs. This has reportedly involved dragging out the time needed to determine if students qualify to be put into a special education classroom or need assistance from a teacher's aide, in order to reduce expenditures. The overall impact of the cuts was worsened by the overcrowding caused in Emanuel's mass closure of 50 elementary schools in 2013.

Chambers, who has taught in CPS for eight years, is a member of the executive board of the Chicago Teachers Union and co-chair of the leading CORE (Caucus of Rank and File Educators) faction of the CTU, which took control of the union in 2010. Led by Karen Lewis and International Socialist Organization member Jesse Sharkey, CORE ran on a platform of rank-and-file democracy, opposition to privatization and cuts, including the expansion of charter schools and imposition of punitive, high-stakes testing of students.

These pledges were quickly revealed to be a cover for the CTU's increasingly open collaboration with the widely hated Emanuel administration.

When opposition to school cuts and closures erupted among teachers in 2012 and 26,000 teachers walked out, the CORE leadership—determined to prevent any political confrontation with Obama administration and its anti-public education agenda—shut down the nine-day strike on terms set by Emanuel. This paved the way for the mass school closures in 2013 that have degraded working and learning conditions in the schools. In return for its services, CTU and its parent union the American Federation of Teachers, was awarded the opportunity to begin collecting dues from the growing pool of low-paid charter schoolteachers.

Since 2012, the CTU has done everything it can to prevent any significant mobilization of teachers against the attack on public education being carried out by the Democratic Party in Chicago, with the support of both big business parties at the national level.

The witch-hunt against Sarah Chambers must be opposed and she should be reinstated immediately. Her planned termination is aimed at intimidating and silencing all teachers, students and parents who want to fight for public education.

No faith can be placed in the CTU, which is totally opposed to a struggle by teachers and broader sections of the working class to oppose Emanuel and the continued victimization of teachers. The CTU would be more than willing to sacrifice Chambers in their horsetrading with Emanuel and school authorities.

The targeting of teachers for opposing education inequality is a national phenomenon. Brooklyn, New York high school principal Jill Bloomberg and two teachers at her Park Slope Collegiate (PSC) school are under investigation for alleged “communist activity.” Bloomberg has filed a complaint with a federal court in New York stating the city's investigation is political retribution for her advocacy against unequal school funding. The *New York Times* reported that staff members believe that the red-baiting campaign began after the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) representative at PSC made accusations against Bloomberg and the two teachers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* strongly opposes the victimization of Chambers, Bloomberg and every teacher blackguarded by school administrators and

union bureaucrats for defending the rights of their students. But it is teachers themselves, in opposition to the Democrats and Republicans and their lackeys in the unions, who must organize for their own defense. They can fight and win the support of students, parents and workers to reject the lying consensus that “there is no money” and mobilize the entire working class to defend the social right to high-quality and well-funded public education for all.



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