

Court orders striking staff at suburban Chicago school district back to work

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Very low wages, the most meager retirement pay, and raises that do not come close to cost of living increases—these are the issues in a strike by school workers in the northwestern suburbs of Chicago. Now, a Cook County court, acting on behalf of the school district, has intervened to strip a section of workers involved in the stoppage of the right to strike and fight for improved wages, benefits and working conditions.

Early Monday morning, about 450 school support staff, including nurses, sign language interpreters, physical and occupational therapists, clerical staff, secretaries and teacher aides, of Community Consolidated School District 15 walked out on strike for the first time. The district serves about 12,800 students in 20 schools in the towns of Palatine, Hoffman Estates, Arlington Heights, Barrington and Rolling Meadows, all suburbs northwest of Chicago.

Negotiations had reportedly gone on for 12 hours on Sunday when they were called off at 5 a.m. and the decision was taken to walk out. Negotiations have been going since February on a new labor agreement to replace one that expired on June 30. A federal mediator was brought in last month after no progress was made towards a settlement. Earlier this month the staff voted to authorize a walkout on October 16.

A few hours after the strike started, Palatine School District 15 filed suit in county court to block 168 of the workers, the nurses and classroom aides, from joining the strike. By Tuesday morning, Cook County Judge Neil Cohen ordered the 153 teacher's aides and 15 nurses back on the job immediately, siding with the district's claim of a "clear and present danger" to 374 special needs students aged 3 to 14.

The attempt to slander the support workers as shirking their responsibility is vile, and the workers, along with many parents, have made statements

reasserting their commitment to the students. As for the courts and the school authorities on the state and local levels, their supposed commitment to children has not stopped them from imposing savage cuts to educational funding, closing schools and imposing intolerable conditions on educators and staff that drastically undermine public education.

The school support workers are members of the Educational Support Personnel Association, which is affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA). The union is asking for a meager 2.8 percent annual pay raise over five years and retirement benefits. Some of the several hundred positions have starting pay as low as \$11.00 per hour. The district's counteroffer is a 1.1 percent annual pay raise for the five-year agreement. Support workers' retirement benefits have reportedly not improved since 1992—a shocking 25-year-stagnation with no cost of living adjustment—and then only amount to \$9,000 (\$3,000 per year for the first three years of retirement). The district wants to eliminate the retirement benefit entirely.

The low wages, poor benefits and the violation of the democratic right to strike all give the lie to any claim by the court that these workers, who dedicate themselves professionally to supporting public education and do difficult work, are in any way valued by the state, whose courts and smug administrators serve the corporate and financial elites.

District 15 Superintendent Scott Thompson declared the injunction would not affect the negotiations which are set to resume Wednesday. The remaining support staff will continue to strike.

Neither the NEA, the Chicago Federation of Teachers or its Illinois affiliate have called for any broader mobilization of teachers and other sections of the working class to oppose this blatant strikebreaking. The

Illinois Education Association (IEA) has saddled district teachers to what amounts to a slave charter—a 10-year-long contract, which does not expire until 2026 and prohibits teachers from honoring picket lines.

In hypocritical fashion, IEA (NEA) spokeswoman Bridget Shanahan spoke to the press on the ruling: “We are very disappointed by the judge's decision in court and plan to fight the ruling to protect our members’ right to legally strike and join the picket line.”

School employees should take the conduct of the strike into their own hands and campaign for broad support throughout the area against this attack on their rights. Such a struggle must be conducted independently of the unions, which are politically tied to the Democratic Party. The Democrats, no less than Trump, DeVos and the Republicans are carrying out a frontal assault on teachers, other school workers and the right to public education.



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