

With medical and health benefits cut

Palatine, Illinois school district support staff return to picket lines

George Marlowe
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Over 160 support staff in the Chicago suburban school district of Palatine, Illinois returned to the picket lines on October 25 after a judge lifted a temporary restraining order that prevented them from striking. The support staff at Community Consolidated School District 15 rejoined the remaining support staff already on strike over the poverty conditions they face.

The workers have been working without a contract since July 1, even as negotiations for a new contract began in February. After a federal mediator failed to negotiate a contract settlement, the 464 support staff—including nurses, special education classroom aides, secretaries, clerical workers and other staff—walked out on October 16. The workers are represented in the contract dispute by the Education Support Personnel Association (ESPA), which is affiliated with the Illinois Education Association (IEA) and its national counterpart.

The support staff went on strike to fight low wages and declining working conditions. Many of these workers make starvation wages as low as \$11 an hour, pay high out-of-pocket health care costs and are forced to work a second or a third job just to make ends meet. These low-paid support staff work in Palatine Township District 15, which is the third-largest elementary-only district in Illinois, and serves over 12,600 students in the northwestern Chicago suburbs—including Palatine, Arlington Heights, Hoffman Estates, Rolling Meadows and portions of other towns.

Highlighting the contempt of the state for these highly exploited workers, Cook County Judge Neil Cohen issued a temporary restraining order against 168 support striking nurses and special education classroom

aides the day after the strike began. Within the first few hours of the strike, the district filed a suit blocking the workers from going on strike. In an attempt to intimidate the striking workers, the district cynically claimed that the staff's absence would be a "clear and present danger" to hundreds of special needs children between the ages of 3 and 14. The judge sided with the district and ordered the workers to return to the classroom immediately.

Attorneys for the Palatine school district also filed a motion to consider a permanent injunction against the "essential workers" from going on strike. However, Judge Cohen rejected the motion to consider a permanent injunction. The judge also lifted his previous temporary restraining order barring any "essential workers" from going on strike. However, neither the courts nor the school district are genuinely concerned over the safety of the children or the broader conditions of public education. The state is most interested in keeping labor costs low, something they have accomplished with the unions in previous contracts.

While the district attempts to besmirch the workers—and to pit them against parents and children—there has been broad support among parents and workers in the area for the support staff. One worker, whose child has special needs, noted the hypocrisy of the school district keeping support staff impoverished for doing critical work: "In my mind, the district is sending the message that these staff members are not important enough to pay a fair wage, yet they are obviously vital enough that my kid can't be at school safely without them."

The greatest threat to the well-being of the children comes from the attack on public education, teachers

and support staff by the state and the political establishment. The state of Illinois, under both Democrats and Republicans, has presided over mass school closures, drained education budgets and reduced per-pupil funding for children of low-income families and special needs children. Teachers and students across Illinois and the rest of country face intolerable conditions as funding for public education has been drastically slashed.

School administrators and district Superintendent Scott Thompson have been intransigent in maintaining that the “essential workers” do not have a democratic right to strike. The district has also cruelly cut off health benefits to those workers on strike, while claiming the district has “not committed any unfair labor practices.” In fact, cuts to the support workers’ benefits illegal as workers have paid for them in advance.

In terms of the contract dispute, the district stated it would offer a five-year contract with a 1.85 percent annual increase in pay for the first two years, and 1.85 to 2.25 percent raises for the remaining three years, which would effectively put the pay raises well below inflation. The IEA for its part has been asking for a miserly 2.5 percent annual raise for five years, which amounts to a mere 10 to 25 cents per hour. The union has also sought to maintain the previous retirement incentive of \$9,000 per employee for the first three years after retirement.

While the IEA has claimed to defend striking workers, it has in practice worked out concessionary deals for the staff in previous contracts while preserving poverty wages. In the past two contracts, the annual increases were either under 2 percent annually or barely surpassed them. The raises hardly made up for the hundreds of dollars in health care costs for individuals and over \$1,000 per family. The IEA also accepted a no-strike clause in previous contracts for the support staff.

Bridget Shanahan, spokesperson for the IEA, stated hypocritically: “The 168 who were forced back to work will rejoin their fellow members on the picket line. We are stronger together.” In fact, the IEA has isolated these workers from the teachers and broader sections of the working class across the state and country.

The teachers in the District 15 are prohibited from walking out with the support staff as a result of their

current contract. Last year, the IEA negotiated an unprecedented 10-year deal with the district for teachers. No other school district has had a contract last so long. While the business press slammed the contract for supposed 6 percent raises in the final years, the district had worked it out so that the annual wage increases would amount to only 1 percent, with teachers retiring and the hiring of lower-paid new teachers taken into account.

The sell-out contract effectively chained these teachers for a decade while also imposing a no-strike clause and high out-of-pocket health costs. Teachers and support staff can put no trust in these unions, which work hand-in-glove with the district administration and the state to reduce labor costs and create the very poverty conditions that support staff are now fighting. The 10-year teachers contract worked out in 2016 was itself negotiated by Lisa Nuss, the former Palatine teachers union president, who joined the District 15 administration in 2015.

Public school teachers, support staff and working class children face an array of monied social forces that want to destroy public education. Support staff and teachers must take the struggle into their own hands, in opposition to the unions and both big business parties, to make any serious gains. They must appeal to the teachers in Chicago and workers across the region, where they will find broad support for their common struggles.



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