

After ultimatum and threats of job loss

Union ends Palatine, Illinois support staff strike without contract

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On Monday, after nearly two weeks out on strike, 464 support staff at the Chicago suburban school district of Palatine, Illinois were sent back to work without a contract by their union. Palatine Elementary Township School District 15 threatened the school support workers with being replaced after the latest round of contract negotiations reached an impasse.

When the Educational Support Personnel Association (ESPA) rejected the District's "best, last" offer, the administration issued an ultimatum, threatening to replace all the workers by Monday if they did not return to work. Instead of calling for a broader mobilization of teachers and workers to fight against the attack on public education, however, the union and its state affiliate, Illinois Education Association (IEA), completely capitulated.

Union representatives cynically claimed they were sending the workers back to work without a contract because of their concern for the children. SPA President Angie Drakowski told the press, "We are extremely disappointed by the board's actions, but are anxious to get back to the students that we love."

By sending this highly exploited and impoverished section of workers back to work without mobilizing a broader fight-back by teachers in the region, the union has only helped further the attack on public school teachers, staff and students. Children with special needs—which the administration has pretended to defend—cannot get the proper education and attention they deserve when their educational caretakers work two or more jobs just to make ends meet. Most of the support staff make wages as low as \$11 an hour even as they work with children with critical special education needs.

Both the union and administration have stated their intention to continue negotiations. However, since returning to work, no new bargaining sessions have been scheduled, according to IEA spokesperson Bridget Shanahan.

From the beginning, the union worked within the framework of the district's demands and placed the workers they claim to represent under conditions of duress. The IEA isolated the support staff from teachers in the district and other layers of workers in the region. With the union having conceded defeat by sending staff back to work without an agreement, the administration will certainly demand further concessions.

Fighting poverty wages and a pittance in annual raises, the school support staff workers in Palatine township went on strike on October 16 after a federal mediator failed to broker a contract settlement. The support staff workers—which include special education classroom aides, nurses, secretaries and other clerical staff—had been laboring without a contract since July 1, despite negotiations being ongoing since February.

From the outset, the school administration, the courts and the state have treated these workers with contempt and have lined up against them. The day after the strike began, Cook County Judge Neil Cohen issued a temporary restraining order against 168 support staff who were deemed to be "emergency workers" by the school district, which filed a lawsuit to bar the workers from going on strike.

Showcasing its complete hypocrisy, the district used children between the ages of 3 and 14 with special needs as a battering ram against the support staff. The district claimed that the support workers would be putting the lives of the children in "clear and present

danger.”

In the midst of the strike the district ruthlessly cut off the workers’ health and medical benefits, which workers had paid for in advance. They painted the support staff as being greedy and negligent of the students’ needs.

By scapegoating the support staff—and attempting to pit them against parents and children—the district cynically sought to prevent the workers from fighting for better working conditions, wages, annual raises, and lower health care costs. However, both teachers and working class parents expressed their support, agreeing that the support staff working with the students deserved much better than starvation wages.

When the support workers returned to work, District 15 Superintendent Scott Thompson welcomed them back as “part of our family.” Thompson’s hypocritical statement is a slap in the face of these workers after the abusive and intimidating treatment they received from the district and the courts.

The final offer by the district included a 2 percent annual raise for five years and no retirement benefits until 2019.

With wages as low as \$11 an hour for many of the support staff, the 2 percent raise would not lift them out of poverty. Most of the workers pay hundreds of dollars in out-of-pocket monthly health care costs, with some paying more than \$1,000 per family.

Previous contracts worked out by the IEA and ESPA with the district involved one concession after another—including meager annual wage increases, high health care costs and no-strike clauses. Furthermore, the IEA effectively isolated the support staff from the teachers by preventing the teachers from going on strike as well. In 2016, they chained teachers to an unprecedented 10-year sellout contract. The terms of the agreement were entirely favorable to the district’s austerity aims, effectively giving the teachers a mere 1 percent annual raise, well below inflation.

Neither the IEA nor the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has any interest in defending education support staff or teacher. They have worked with the state to lay off teachers, close schools and assist in privatizing education. Nationwide, there has been a relentless attack on public education by both the Democratic and Republican parties.

The Obama administration presided over mass school

closures and teacher layoffs—including in the nearby Chicago Public Schools in 2013 under his former chief of staff, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel—while working with the unions to impose one defeat after another on educators.

Support staff and teachers seeking to defend public education can place no confidence in either the unions or the two parties of big business. They must take the struggle into their own hands and appeal to the widest section of workers in the region, nationally and internationally, where they will find broad support for a fight for the defense of public education and the rights of the working class.



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