

Striking Chicago teachers and staff determined to defend public education

A WSWS reporting team
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WSWS reporters spoke with teachers picketing in Chicago on Monday who expressed their determination to defend public education and improve conditions in Chicago Public Schools. They walked out on October 17.

Amy is a teacher at Jones College Prep High School. She said, “My biggest concern is that across the city things are so staggeringly inequitable. I’m on strike because all of the schools in the city should have what we have here at Jones—resources.”

“I grew up working class but I make good money now. I should be making good money! When I was a kid I used to apologize when I got sick because of the expenses. The fact that I can take my kids to the doctor any time I needed it. This should be the norm across the city, across the country, across the planet. Everyone should be able to go to the doctor. It’s repulsive.”

“The other schools are inequitably funded. We have reasonably sized classes. We have some large classes that are 29 to 32. We also have students who have been prepared with good backgrounds. In other neighborhoods, not the ones where they have connections, not downtown wealthy areas, in an attempt to consolidate schools and save money, they will deliberately close a school and open a charter school. They will say ‘it’s a better option!’ They will pay the teachers less and treat them poorly and be surprised when they leave. The schools that are farther away and less likely to land in the newspaper and are less aware of how to amplify their voices, it’s super easy to ignore them. It’s this ongoing pattern of ignoring people who are less likely to know how to use their voices. In those schools, we have kindergartens, first grades and second grades with 40 to 42 kids. We have teachers who have 32 desks and 37 students.

“If we have 40 kids in a kindergarten, with varying

levels and varying needs, varying language skills and varying home situations, five years from now when those kids are in fourth and fifth grades, what happens when their tests go down? It’s a social crisis that is created and sustained that would fix the things they blame on us. They say we’re doing it wrong and they won’t pay us. And they deliberately create a cycle where they demonize the public school teachers and the actual functionality of education. It’s not a failure of education; it’s a failure of policy to prioritize education.

Speaking on the enormous wealth in the city. “They’re hoarding it like dragons in their caves, sitting on their pile of gold. The hoarded wealth that’s invested in Cayman islands, Swiss bank accounts, and all their real estate, it doesn’t trickle anywhere. It doesn’t benefit anyone. It doesn’t even benefit the people who have it other than for bragging rights. They don’t do anything with it. Their refusal to pay not just a living wage but a comfortable wage shows their disdain for us. They don’t work 8 million times harder or better than the average worker. They stacked the deck. It’s theft through withholding. It’s theft of people’s health and their futures.

“I’m a literature major and an armchair historian. If Charles Dickens were in Chicago today, he would not have enough time to write all of the stories that would come from that. This is not just a *Tale of Two Cities*. This is like *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*. Actually, the most socialist of all his works is *Hard Times*. In *Hard Times* you literally see the strike of coal miners and two or three owners of the mines demonize the workers and bring about the death of the organizer. And that was written in the 1850s! And almost 150 years later, here we are... Things were briefly better and they siphoned it all away.

On how conditions have reached a breaking point in CPS, she said, “In 2012, our union said we won. We didn’t win! We didn’t lose as they threatened to take. And that was a win? They literally added 1 hour to every class day in 2012 and ten days to the end of the year. They added 20 percent of our time in the building. We were working 120 percent of the hours we had worked in the building. And not only did we not get a raise, we slightly lost money because they gave us a raise and added to our healthcare cost. And they said, we won this strike. The hell we did!”

Larisa is a classroom assistant. She and her fellow staff members explained they are striking for lower class sizes and better pay. Their contract, recently agreed by SEIU with the school district, is to be voted on Tuesday. They wanted more time to review the new contract. They explained the ratification process, that they will gather and the agreement will be read out to them and they will be asked to take an immediate vote.

Larisa said, “The cost of living makes it difficult to make ends meet. Our monthly healthcare costs gone up from \$150 to \$180 per month.”

On the conditions in their school, she said, “There are over 40 kids in the class. Many are refugees and a few children of homeless families who come to school and stay for the after-hours program for the three meals they can get. There are not enough desks and the kids have to crowd around tables and benches to fit into the classroom. They have no textbooks so the teacher has to print material from Google and hand them out.”



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