

Chicago high school students hold sit-in in defense of students who refused to stand for national anthem

Andy Thompson
15 February 2020

Students at Chicago's Nicholas Senn High School carried out a sit-in on Wednesday in response to a teacher telling a Hispanic student, Yésica Salazar, 17, to "go back to your country" after Salazar refused to stand for the American national anthem during an assembly on January 30. Another student who also refused to stand, Tionda Cobb, 18, was questioned about her status in the school's free lunch program and was told she should stand because, "people had died for the country." The two were removed from the assembly by school administrators. Both students are US citizens.

As of Friday morning, the school has suspended the teacher who made the remarks to the students. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that Senn's principal Mary Beck sent a letter to parents Thursday, saying that "new information came to light" as Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) Office of Student Protections and Title IX opened an investigation, prompting it "to remove this individual from working in our school." The teacher will remain on paid leave until an investigation is concluded.

In the weeks after the assembly, students felt that the administration was not responding to their complaints and they began organizing Wednesday's sit-in. The demonstration effectively canceled the normal operation of the school for the day.

Shalom, a junior at Senn who participated in the sit-in, told the WSW, "I learned about it at the very last minute, during second period from the person sitting next to me. The sit-in was scheduled for third period. It was organized, from what I understand, by the two girls who were kicked out and spread over social media, specifically Snapchat and Instagram, I believe." He continued, "I wasn't sure if anyone was even going to

show up and was prepared to head back to class if nobody was there. But when I headed down to the first floor when the bell rang a bunch of students poured in. At the end of third period the staff told us to head back to class, but we refused and stayed in that spot until seventh period."

During the demonstration students made makeshift signs from their notebooks, chanted slogans like "We want justice, we want peace" and called for the teacher who made the comments to be removed from the school. Principal Beck first responded by trying to persuade students to return to class, saying that she had taken all steps to file the students' complaints with the CPS administration.

Distrusting CPS—which is dominated by Democratic party officials, closed 50 schools in 2013 and has enforced significant cuts to funding and programs—students continued the sit-in. The school then called in additional police officers to monitor the demonstration and intimidate students into ending the protest.

Towards the end of the demonstration one student, a 15-year-old girl, was arrested by the officers called to the school. Reports indicate that a minor altercation between two students broke out and a teacher was shoved while trying to break the students apart. The student was charged with battery. Further details on her arrest have not yet been made available.

After the sit-in ended students moved into the auditorium where Principal Beck said she would answer students' questions. "They don't listen to us" said Shalom. After attending the auditorium meeting, he remarked that "there was a lot more resentment" by the students towards the school as their concerns

surrounding the incident had not been addressed.

The sit-in at Senn is an example of young people's complete rejection of nationalism and racism promoted by the ruling class. Salazar told the *Chicago Sun-Times* that those who had refused to stand during the National Anthem at the assembly were seeking to protest "U.S. immigration policies, anti-immigrant political rhetoric and police brutality."

These are sentiments which are widely held by young people, their teachers, and other sections of the working class. But any effort to voice their politics puts students in direct confrontation with both the Republican and Democratic parties that dominate US political life.

At virtually every public appearance President Donald Trump enters into a fascistic rant accusing immigrants of being criminals and of draining the United States of resources. His speeches are then blasted on 24-hour news programs and portrayed as normal, respectable political views.

The Democrats are equally responsible for the attack on immigrants. Under the administration of Barack Obama about three million immigrants were deported during his eight years in office earning him the label "deporter in chief." The Democrats in Congress have repeatedly funded Trump's immigration crackdown and have allowed him to illegally transfer billions in funds to build a border wall with Mexico. More recently on the local level, Chicago Democrats have agreed to allow ICE to deputize CPD officers in order to bypass "sanctuary city" laws that would prevent cooperation between local law enforcement and the Federal government.

The response to the students' protest by pseudo-left figures who operate to funnel opposition back behind the Democrats has been completely demagogic. Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) Vice President Stacy Davis-Gates re-tweeted a video of the students demonstration saying, "Our students. Let's listen. Let's respond." However there is no indication that any action has been taken by CTU to look into the matter or address students' concerns.

A recent survey found that as many as 70 percent of the Millennial and Gen Z generations say they would vote for a socialist in an election. Students are rightly furious with the state of affairs that they find themselves growing up in, as they can expect to graduate into a world with fewer job opportunities,

lower pay, and more inequality than their parents.

The conditions young people face are driving them to take action. The last few years have seen millions of young people march to oppose Trump, school shootings, and to defend the rights of immigrants.

But to achieve their goals students will have to break completely with the Democrats and the Republicans, twin capitalist parties which are responsible for the dire social and economic conditions students face. Students need a real alternative to defend immigrant rights and to secure a future for themselves without poverty and war.

The only political candidates that offer such an alternative and a political program to make it possible are Joseph Kishore and Norissa Santa Cruz, the Socialist Equality Party's candidates for President and Vice President in the 2020 US elections. Students looking to truly protect immigrants, end war, and build socialism should join the SEP's youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, and support the election campaign of Kishore and Santa Cruz.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact