

Nearly half of all teachers in Brookline, Massachusetts receive pink slips

Will McCalliss
2 June 2020

The Public Schools of Brookline, a district located in Greater Boston, Massachusetts, handed out just over 300 pink slips last Friday, nearly half of the district's 645 teachers. These drastic cuts follow the similar elimination of all art, PE and music classes in the nearby working class town of Randolph. The fact that such devastating cuts can take place in a middle class town like Brookline, where the median income stands at \$111,289, demonstrates that only the wealthiest layers of society are safe from the pandemic's fallout and many similar stories will soon emerge with horrifying frequency across the US.

Although the full list of staff that received pink slips is not public, based on discussions between teachers it appears that the departments most affected by the layoffs are physical education, art, early education and special education, with entire departments being laid off, along with many paraprofessionals and librarians. Perhaps most disturbingly, all school nurses were laid off, whose work will be more essential than ever if schools reopen in the fall.

The Brookline School Committee (BSC) announced in a letter sent to the school community that they had "no choice but to provide layoff notices to some of our valued teachers and staff," citing "the COVID-19 induced budget crisis in the Town of Brookline and the contractual obligation with the Brookline Educators Union (BEU) to provide notices of layoff by May 30." The letter also falsely states that no departments are being cut, even though many could be staffed by zero teachers come September.

The night before the pink slips were distributed, a community member broke the news in a local Facebook group, writing, "the school committee plans to lay off hundreds of Brookline teachers," and adding that they had "just learned about this tonight." The group was immediately alight with hundreds of comments, largely consisting of parents in distress. "This is beyond horrible. I am sick," wrote one Brookline parent, quickly capturing the sentiment of many.

In reaction to a shocked community, the Brookline Parents Organization quickly organized a video conference for

Sunday, where Suzanne Federspiel and David Pearlman, two BSC members, and State Representative Tommy Vitolo answered questions posed by moderator Meghna Chakrabarti, a local radio host and Brookline parent.

The discussion began with an overview of the budgetary situation, clarifying what was sent out in the letter to the community. Though a deficit of "a couple million" was projected in early 2020, Federspiel explained, after the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the BSC was informed by the town mid-May that it was responsible for actually handling a \$6.3 million deficit. According to Pearlman, 71 percent of the town's revenue comes from property taxes, largely unaffected by the pandemic, while the other 29 percent which largely depends upon sales tax and fines has been massively impacted, thus tripling the school's deficit.

Matters are complicated by the fact that Massachusetts has not yet dictated how schools will operate—whether online, in person, or via some hybrid—and possibly will not until "as late as July," said Pearlman. Additionally, money from the town's \$26 million "rainy day fund" cannot be allocated until a town meeting on June 23, and, similarly, state and federal funds, which are less reliable than ever, operate on different calendars than Brookline's.

The discussion then steered towards the pink slips, which dominated the rest of the conference. The pink slips were released on May 29, the last business day before the May 30 deadline stipulated by the BEU. Chakrabarti then pointed out the fact that the pink slips amount to "\$20 million in savings," more than triple the size of the deficit, asking, "so why send out so many?"

Federspiel laid out the committee's reasoning, which amounted to a desire for flexibility. The BSC currently has no idea what their budget truly is or what staffing needs the district will have come September, so it has laid off a plethora of teachers so it can later decide which of them might be invited back. With so many unknown variables, the logistical calculations were evidently too complex for district officials to handle this situation humanely.

Pearlman clarified that teachers with "pre-professional

status,” those who have been teaching at Brookline for less than three years, are more readily considered for layoffs than those who are “essentially tenured.” Giving a theoretical example, Pearlman said that if fewer physical education teachers are needed, one who is licensed to teach 2nd grade would be kept over one who is not. The committee would “need to then find a 2nd grade teacher with pre-professional status and that person would then be terminated.” This falls in line with the national trend of massive unemployment for young workers.

The BSC’s actions have left hundreds not knowing whether they will be employed this fall, forcing them into extreme financial uncertainty and psychological distress. As one teacher put it, “I hope there will be massive rehiring in the fall, but all bets are off at this point.” She has every reason to worry. The University of Chicago has predicted that 42% of jobs lost to the COVID-19 pandemic will not return. The ruling class is using the pandemic as an excuse to cut jobs and slash wages and these layoffs will provide plenty of “flexibility” to direct tax revenue away from education and into the pockets of the ultra-wealthy.

Though wealthier than Randolph, similar themes have emerged in both towns. One is the shameful way by which news came to teachers losing their jobs. “I have no first-hand information and I’m reeling at this moment,” wrote one performing arts teacher the night before pink slips were distributed. Another similarity is their community’s understanding of the need for more teachers under these circumstances. It is self-evident that more teachers are required to either enable and enforce social distancing among students or to effectively teach online, not fewer. Lastly, in both districts physical education and the arts are among the departments facing the most severe layoffs.

Vitolo explained during the conference that Chapter 70 funds—those that come from the state—will almost certainly not be available. Painting a dark picture for the future, Vitolo compared the ongoing situation to the 2008 financial crisis, where “state aid was cut pretty severely, and there’s no reason to think it won’t happen again.” He said the problem facing local and state governments is “what do we harm the most and what do we harm the least?”

This question has already been answered by the response of the political establishment to the pandemic, as both the Republican and Democratic parties united to pass the misnamed CARES act, handing over trillions to Wall Street while starving public education and all the social services upon which the working class depends.

In response to the layoffs, BEU sent out a feckless letter to the Brookline community. The union urged teachers and local residents to pressure the school to ask for and accept donations from “people of means,” a stop-gap solution

which would subordinate the right to a proper education to the philanthropic whims of wealthier residents. The letter emphasizes the failure of the BSC to enlist the services of the union, which could have provided “educators’ advice and expertise about what our students need and deserve.” In other words, they bemoan the fact that the union was not more directly involved in deciding who to lay off. The BSC and BEU are ultimately playing a fruitless game of finger-pointing and neither presents any plan to save teachers’ jobs and the state of public education in Brookline.

Notably absent from the union’s statement was any connection made to the broader crisis facing public education across the US. While the video conference was taking place, protesters in Boston were marching to the Massachusetts State House, not four miles away from Brookline High School, as part of the international wave of protests against police brutality sparked by the gruesome murder of George Floyd. The crisis of capitalism, which is responsible for the unending police brutality, as well as the mass social dislocation and austerity wrought by the pandemic, has impelled hundreds of thousands into struggle.

The urgent necessity is now to unite this movement with the broader working class, including educators, to transform society in a revolutionary socialist manner. We urge all educators facing joblessness and austerity in Brookline, Randolph and across the country to take up this fight, and to contact us today at teachers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact