

Chicago-area teachers and staff strike over pay, class sizes

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About 280 teachers and staff in Maywood, Illinois, walked out on strike on Friday, March 4, the first strike in the Chicago-area district in 22 years.

Social workers, librarians and counselors joined teachers on the picket lines outside of District 209's three high schools. With no contract resolution in sight, classes for the schools' 4,200 students have been canceled through March 11.

Neil Rutstein, a teacher at Proviso Math and Science Academy in Forest Park, told the *Maywood News*, "This has become a toxic workplace. It's really hard to block that stuff out of your mind and still do your job effectively. It's really stressful and not just for us. Last month, the kids couldn't deal with it either and walked out. I don't know what they're waiting for. You can't have a bigger disaster than a school on strike."

Proviso Township teachers have, like their colleagues throughout the US, been underpaid for years while laboring under intense pressures during the pandemic. The average teacher salary in the district is reportedly nearly 30 percent lower than the already inadequate level of Chicago area educators. The teachers have been working without a contract since July 2021, with the district taking a punitively hard line while repeatedly failing to show up for negotiations.

On Wednesday, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten visited the strike, as well as another one in nearby Riverdale, Illinois. She was in the region in an attempt to avert and isolate the multiple teacher walkouts. On Wednesday, 3,000 Minneapolis, Minnesota, teachers began a historic strike, the first in 50 years. No doubt as a result of AFT pressure, a joint strike set to occur in neighboring St.

Paul was blocked. The walkout was abruptly canceled and a deal "within the district's budget" was initialed by the union, according to school authorities.

Throughout the pandemic, Weingarten, the AFT and the National Educators Association (NEA) have insisted that teachers remain on the job, despite the death toll to educators, families and students. This homicidal policy follows the unions' efforts to block the mobilization of educators against the systematic defunding of public education and the scandalously low wages and benefits which are now commonplace in schools across the US.

In that vein, Weingarten presented the Proviso situation as unique—rather than indicative of the terrible conditions facing educators across the US. She claimed District 209 Superintendent James Henderson was guilty merely of "a lack of leadership." "People are trying to do their best and working together to work it out," she said. "As opposed to a superintendent pushing people out on strike like they did in Proviso."

Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker has notoriously underfunded education at all levels. His current budget's centerpiece is a \$1 billion tax cut. Meanwhile, schools are reeling from lack of support on all levels, from special education funding to school nurses and mental health professionals.

Proviso is a case in point. The staff has been working without a contract since July 2021. After months of negotiation and federal mediation, the district upped its wages offer of 2 percent annually to 9 percent over three years. Under conditions of 7.9 percent inflation, the offer comes close to a 15 percent pay cut over the life of the contract.

The Proviso Teachers Union's (PTU) demand is a meager improvement, 12.75 percent over the three-year contract, a pay cut in the range of 11 percent, offset

only peripherally by “longevity” bonuses for all teachers of \$1,250 in the first year and \$600 in the second year.

In line with the AFT/NEA sabotage of the unity of school workers’ struggles, the PTU’s affiliated unions in the West Suburban Teachers Union Local 571 have rejected joint strike action even though they are also working without a contract. That includes the Proviso Custodian and Maintenance Union, an affiliate of Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the Proviso Support Staff Council covering support service employees including clerks, instructional aides, lunchroom monitors and nurses.

Proviso East English teacher Brandon Kujawa told local media, “For me, class size is the most important issue, as well as being able to attract and retain dedicated teachers. What happens here is we get a lot of great teachers in the early years of their careers, but then they only stay two years before they move to another district that pays better.”

The PTU is suggesting a “cap” of 100 students for music classes, 50 for gym and 25 for special education case management. That these numbers would be considered a “cap” is indicative of the runaway phenomena of children being packed into classes with no regard for learning. While oversized classrooms have been tolerated for years by the unions and the Democratic Party, the widespread exodus of teachers from the classroom during the pandemic has dramatically worsened class sizes across the US.

Students at all three District 209 high schools walked out February 16 in a mass demonstration of support to their teachers.

Meanwhile, just south of Maywood in Riverdale, 19 teachers also went on strike Tuesday at Patton Elementary School. During the last nine months of negotiations, the district insisted on a four-year agreement with raises of about 4 percent annually, a significant pay cut under current inflation rates.

That union, also affiliated with the AFT, is calling instead for an inadequate 6 percent a year over three years and the funding of art and technology programs. They pointed to the district’s apparent surplus due to the one-time CARES funding.

Parent Lashon Howard told Fox 32, “The teachers here are so wonderful, if they’re not getting a fair contract it affects us, too,” Howard said. “The school is

understaffed. It’s not fair to them to not get a good contract. It’s not fair to us parents to have to watch this.”



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