

“Everything is on the table”: Budget crisis deepens in Chicago as educators are laid off, denied back pay

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More than 1,450 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers and staff received layoff notices this month, in the second round of job cuts this summer. Special education classrooms have been hit hardest, losing 677 Special Education Classroom Assistants (SECAs), organized under the SEIU.

More than 430 teachers, 311 paraprofessional aides and 33 security guards were also among those pink-slipped. Earlier this summer, more than 160 were laid off and 209 unfilled positions closed, including central office workers and crossing guards.

The CPS budget deficit has recently been reported to far exceed the \$529 million originally announced in May, now standing somewhere around \$734 million. CPS officials claim the first round of summer layoffs saved more than \$160 million and the administration has promised to review all avenues for cutting even more. A budget is to be approved by August 29.

The district’s chief budget officer told WBEZ: “Everything is on the table... It’s too early to say where we’re going to land.”

The looming crisis in the school district, which coincides with “doomsday” planning of 40 percent cuts to the regional transit system, is part of a massive nationwide funding crisis affecting almost every large city in America. This crisis has been generated artificially by the cutoff of federal funding under Biden and Trump. Together with the massive cuts to federal Medicaid and food stamp funding under the “Big Beautiful Bill,” it is part of an all-out attack by the corporate oligarchy on all government programs benefitting the working class.

Meanwhile, the US military budget has ballooned to \$1 trillion a year, and the super-rich have been gifted trillions in tax cuts. The role of Democratic Party city administrations shows this is a bipartisan attack.

Without the intervention of the working class, Chicago and other cities face a catastrophe. A working class movement must be built against both capitalist parties as well as the management stooges in the union bureaucracy. Earlier this month, 9,000 city workers in Philadelphia waged a powerful strike, which was sold out by the AFSCME union with a sellout deal.

The same role is being played by the bureaucracy in every city.

The CPS layoffs come three months after the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) concluded what its leadership called a “transformative” contract that would “protect our students” and “Trump-proof” the district.

But the four-year contract was pushed through by the CTU leadership on entirely false premises. Union leaders concealed the scale of the budget crisis and planned cuts from educators, while claiming an agreement with CPS would somehow force state funding to materialize, secure the federal funding that makes up 16 percent of district revenue, and protect the democratic rights of students and teachers. These were all fantastical lies.

The WSWS warned the agreement was brought to teachers under false pretenses and warned that schools and educators would come under attack immediately following ratification. This was quickly confirmed when mayor Brandon Johnson, a former CTU official elected with the support of the union and the Democratic Socialists of America, suddenly announced that “the situation had changed,” necessitating deep cuts.

This was a lie. Johnson in fact had first floated school cuts in May of 2023, before he was even elected and that he could rely on his ties to the CTU to carry it out. “Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?,” he declared.

A recent comment by CTU President Stacy Davis Gates illustrates the union’s role: It is cold comfort, but these layoffs are lower than last year.” In other words, educators have no choice but to accept cuts.

“Good Trouble” event drew few

The Democratic Party held a “Good Trouble” rally in downtown Chicago July 17, which drew just a couple thousand attendees. At the event, both Mayor Johnson and CTU President Davis Gates repeated the lie that the teachers’ contract protects schools from ruling class attacks. They were supported by NEA President Becky Pringle and representatives

from the National Education Association, among other Democratic Party figures.

The CTU was praised from the stage for achieving a “historic, transformative” contract “without a strike.”

By the time the CTU president took the stage, most of the elderly crowd that had gathered in the plaza hours before had departed. Davis Gates’ remarks did not make any mention of the layoffs and instead referred to CTU’s efforts to remove “lead, asbestos, mold and to get with it on this green, sustainable economy.”

Rather than placing the billionaire-led attacks on public education in their class context, as the Trump administration robs the future to pay for repressions here and war abroad, Davis Gates elevated the issues of race and gender. In closing she made a statement on the viability of American democracy declaring, in the face of the barest social facts: “We get an opportunity to live in a country that forces the wealthy to pay their fair share and that houses each and every one of us.”

Teachers furious over lack of backpay

As the Democratic Party establishment lauds the conduct of CTU leadership, CPS educators are still awaiting the backpay they are owed retroactive to July 2024, when the last contract expired. The date this was supposed to have been paid was moved back throughout the summer, with the latest date given as August 8, a couple days before educators return to school buildings to prepare for the semester.

Teachers and their families are furious over the financial strain this has caused. Increasingly angry exchanges are taking place between educators and union representatives, who have no response except to echo the response of the district, rationalize the delays and to threaten to teachers who raise criticisms over this breach of contract.

“There’s no reason why we worked the entire school year and we’re still waiting to receive what’s owed to us?” one asked.

One teacher said, “I’m still waiting on a paycheck that is owed to me and members calling and emailing instead of my union that helped to elect this mayor give me money that is owed to me.”

Another said, “CTU did not hold CPS accountable for the amount of time we waited for this pay that is owed to us.”

And, “They are out of their minds thinking we are showing up [in August] without our money.”

Speaking from past experience, a teacher remarked: “They [CPS] are busy figuring out their next cuts... figure out our retro pay already! They change our start and stop days on the calendar every year and then they don’t pay teachers money

they owe them... to support their families? Terrible! So are they going to hand out pink slips with the retro pay too?”

Independent rank and file committees must be formed to defend education

Educators, parents, students and the working class in the city of Chicago must organize themselves to fight these bipartisan cuts and mount a defense of the right to free, high quality public education or any other social right.

Independent rank-and-file committees in each school must be formed to advance the demands of teachers for the pay they are owed, to block future attacks on schools, as well as teachers and students. These committees can unite educators with workers across sectors, linking up with transit workers, healthcare and logistics workers to combat the relentless cuts, layoffs and closures and dismantling of vital public infrastructure.

A Chicago teacher has written an appeal to teachers in California and Philadelphia calling for a united struggle to oppose the destruction of public education, jobs and infrastructure in order to pay for repression and war:

Under conditions of deep social and economic crisis, war, and the rise of authoritarianism, educators cannot afford to follow the dead-end perspective of union officials who seek to contain and isolate any real opposition. What is needed is an independent movement from below, led by rank-and-file educators committed to breaking from the suffocating grip of the bureaucracies and mobilizing the power of the working class.

Contact us to link up with the IWA-RFC. Take the fight into your own hands—and join the struggle to defend public education and social equality.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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