

Chicago Public Schools lays off nearly 1,000 as budget impasse threatens more

By Alexander Fangmann
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In early August, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), which is controlled by Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, announced the layoff of 956 workers, including 356 teachers. At the same time, further teacher layoffs and cuts in public education are being planned around the state of Illinois, including at CPS, as state funding to school districts has been halted until Republican Governor Bruce Rauner and the Democratic-controlled state legislature come to an agreement on a school funding bill.

The layoff of educators at CPS, which occurs on a yearly basis, has brought the number of teachers at CPS to fewer than 21,000, from over 26,000 a decade ago, a decline of nearly 20 percent. Meanwhile, class sizes, particularly in kindergarten and the early grades, are among the bottom 10 percent of the state, with some averaging more than 29 students per classroom.

Aside from classroom teachers, other educators and school professionals have seen their ranks fall precipitously. Only 160 librarians are budgeted for all schools, meaning that fewer than 25 percent of schools even have one. Social workers and guidance counseling staff have also been severely reduced.

While CPS claims that the layoffs are the result of “enrollment changes, program adjustments and/or changes in students’ academic needs,” demographic changes alone do not account for the continued layoffs. Indeed, the demographic shifts themselves are in part a product of a deliberate policy of dismantling the system of public education by starving it of funds and promoting the construction of charter schools.

One of the crueler aspects of CPS’s yearly layoff tradition is that laid-off teachers are forced to apply for open positions at other schools. As long as they possess high enough teacher or employee ratings, in other words, if they have not been negatively targeted by

their principals, they are eligible to apply at a series of humiliating job fairs. According to CPS there will be approximately 500 open positions, and that in previous years around 60 percent of laid-off teachers have found positions elsewhere within the system.

These layoffs are likely to be only the first round of cuts planned by CPS for the current school year. A provision of the recently passed state budget specified that no school district in the state would receive funding until the passage of a separate bill overhauling how the state doles out funding to school districts.

Since the Democratic-majority in the state General Assembly was able to override Rauner’s veto, the impasse between them over the continued role of the trade unions in the imposition of social cuts has shifted to the education-funding bill, to which Rauner issued an amendatory veto.

Schools have already missed one payment so far, the first time the state has failed to send school funding to districts, and are preparing to miss a second. Districts around the state are preparing contingency plans in order to open schools on time for the fall term, with some combination of budgets cuts and layoffs and increased debt in order to make up the balance.

Ostensibly, the purpose of the education-funding bill, known as Senate Bill 1 (SB 1), is to fix some of the enormous inequality of Illinois’ education funding system, which relies heavily on local property taxes to fund schools. Indeed, according to a report from the Education Law Center, Illinois gets a grade of F for the fairness of its state education funding, with high-poverty school districts receiving less per-student funding from the state than low-poverty districts.

The bill supposedly remedies this inequality through the elaboration of “adequacy targets” for each school district in the state. These adequacy targets, which

represent what it would cost to properly educate students in the district, are based on complex formulae that take into account a variety of factors including the number of special education students, poverty rates and regional cost differences. Each district is then assigned a “local capacity funding” number, what each district should be able to afford, based on the property taxes it can draw from. Those districts with bigger differences between their adequacy targets and local capacity targets would be in line to receive greater state aid.

CPS would benefit greatly from a number of provisions in SB 1. One would allow CPS to deduct teacher pension costs from its local capacity, as CPS is the only school district that funds teacher pensions directly, with the state picking up pensions for teachers elsewhere. CPS, and other districts, would also be able to deduct property tax revenue in Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts from their local capacity targets, as the TIF mechanism reduces property taxes in designated areas from being accessed by schools, libraries and other taxing bodies.

However, behind the high-flown promises of school funding reform, the reality is that little will change for most school districts, including CPS. Estimates are that under the new funding system in SB 1, the state would need to raise between \$3.5 to \$4 billion in new revenue in order to actually meet those adequacy targets, none of which is anticipated. As a result, one of the biggest differences is that CPS would receive a block grant of \$250 million, largely to cover a backlog of pension payments.

Additionally, the bill contains a number of provisions that further the attack on public education. One would require that charter schools be funded at least 97 percent of the school district per capita rate, rather than 75 percent. Another changes the funding mechanism for special education and bilingual education, combining it with general education funding and potentially threatening services that the most vulnerable students rely upon.

Rauner’s amendatory veto left much of the adequacy targets in place, but removes the provisions for TIFs and pensions from all school districts. Furthermore, it removed a provision that adjusted adequacy targets based on the rate of inflation, rendering them meaningless over time.

Almost immediately after Rauner issued his

amendatory veto, the Democratic-controlled Illinois Senate voted to override his veto, supporting the original bill. Since then, intense negotiations have gone on behind the scenes in the Illinois House over a compromise.

Among the proposals being floated by Republicans is a tax credit for parents who send their children to private schools, essentially a voucher program, funded at \$100 million.

At a panel at the City Club of Chicago on August 15, Republican state senator Jason Barickman offered that one way to end the impasse would be to restrict collective bargaining rights for teachers in the rest of the state, putting them on the same level as Chicago teachers, whose own collective bargaining rights were previously curtailed by the Democrats, in close collaboration with the Chicago Teachers Union and other teachers unions in the state.

Outside of restrictions on the topics of collective bargaining to wages, Barickman also wanted to open up privatizing substantial aspects of public education, saying, “One of the abilities is for Chicago to use third-party contractors for the provision of non-instructional services, whether it be safety, grounds keeping, landscaping or the like.”

In response to the layoffs, not to mention the grave attacks on education and the farcical education funding reform represented by SB 1, the Chicago Teachers Union has kept conspicuously silent. Not only have there been no major protests, the CTU has merely suggested that laid-off teachers attend the hiring fairs, contributing greatly to teacher demoralization. Teachers interested in the defense of public education must build independent rank-and-file committees in a break with the CTU and the AFT, which are allied with the Democratic Party and abet their crimes against the working class.

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