

Heartbreak and class warfare, Chicago-style

July 20, 2013

I'd be heart-broken by the layoffs announced by the Chicago Public Schools, (CPS) even if my pal Xian Barrett (in the photo, talking teaching with me at the DC Save Our Schools demo last April) weren't one of the folks given a pink slip.

By pinning the blame for the layoffs on "the lack of pension reform" Mayor Rahm Emanuel is trying to force the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) to choose between layoffs and cuts to pensions. Meanwhile, the CTU with parent and community allies has brought the district to court to reverse the school closings, tenaciously contested last Spring.

Layoffs are devastating - as are school closings. Can the CTU win this? Or as a reader of my most recent NP seems to suggest, is schooling just too enmeshed in the muck of capitalist social relations for even a good union to counter?

No one has a crystal ball - not me, not readers, and not our enemies. No one knows what the outcome of this struggle will be. This is class warfare, and in wars both sides have wins and losses. The CTU's strike and its success in building solid, mutually respectful alliances with parents, students, community, and other unions go in the "win" column. So far the weight of those successes has not been sufficient to keep Emanuel and the political elite of Chicago whom he represents from countering successfully with the school closings and layoffs.

What to do now? I think the union needs to adopt two strategies simultaneously. First is turning up the heat "from below." CTU knows how to organize and staff are likely cooking up a campaign as I write. Maybe a series of rolling strikes? That's what the two biggest teachers unions in the UK are doing now to push back on the government's attacks on teachers and public education. (Catch that band playing! Love those hats!) The Bad Ass Teachers Association has a campaign to phone Emanuel's office and demand he call off the layoffs. Nice work, BATS!

The other part of the strategy is "from above." This means putting pressure on AFT President Randi Weingarten, who has considerable access to the White House, to use her clout, now. After letting the White House know her intention, Weingarten could have a coffee date with Rahm and explain why he can't tell teachers to choose between pensions and layoffs - not, that is, if he wants a single penny from the AFT for Democrats (who don't deserve a cent to start, but that's another blog...) No campaign workers, no phone banks. And a campaign in the AFL-CIO to follow suit.

What if Weingarten doesn't respond to private pressure? Doesn't want to use her political capital to save the jobs of Chicago teachers? Then we should go public with the demand. Petitions, phone calls, to the AFT national office. Union officials are only as smart and powerful as their members help them to be. Union officers get lots of heat from the media and the politically powerful to be reasonable, that is, make concessions. It's the job of members to push the other direction, hold our officers' feet to the fire. By making demands on Weingarten to defend Xian and the other 2000 CPS employees told they've been laid off, we'll be helping Randi Weingarten to do her job. And by organizing at the schools, with parents, students, and community, the CTU is helping Rahm to be a better Mayor. And boy, does he need help. Until we throw him out.