A Teacher Who's Dangerous – To Chicago's Power Elite

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During the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) spring break, Sarah Chambers, beloved to her special needs students, well-known (to staff and parents of her school), notorious (to CPS labor relations officials), received a letter saying she was suspended and had to stay away from the school. Though Sarah was an early member of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) that is now the CTU's elected leadership, she remained a teacher of special needs kids who represents her school in the House of Delegates and serves on the union's Executive Board.

CPS has concocted a rationale for Sarah's firing based on her outspoken criticism of harm done to special needs students by the standardized testing that is rampant in US schools, indeed worldwide. It's revealing that CPS didn't bother noting this or any other justification for Sarah's suspension in the letter it sent to her. My hunch is CPS is still searching for or embroidering evidence because an activist as experienced as Sarah knows how to push on policies without violating them. That's Union Organizing 101 – and Sarah could teach the course. Any teacher activist as passionate about her teaching and students as Sarah knows how to make sure she doesn't jeopardize her continued ability to be an advocate. We can be sure the charges CPS produces will be bogus.

But why pick on Sarah? The national context for Sarah's suspension is the witch hunt against teachers who stand up for kids' rights and the dignity of the profession. In Chicago the witch hunt has extended to principals, shown in the firing of Troy LaRaviere, who led the #1 rated school in the city. This past year CPS has taken advantage of the understandable demoralization teachers feel at having been forced to swallow loss of pay for "furlough" days while fighting attacks on their pensions.

With an alliance of community partners, CTU is fighting for an elected school board, but until that legislative fight is won, the school system is controlled by Mayor Emanuel. Along with the political machine, he and the business elite who are used to running the city threaten to shut the schools three weeks early because they have no money handy to keep them open. CTU has responded with the possibility of strike action May 1.

Sarah has been suspended to frighten and intimidate CTU members. CPS is sending a message that if Sarah's not safe, no one is. It's an old ploy, which is why unions fought long and hard for protections in labor law against retaliation for union activity. Both unions and employers know this intimidation constitutes an unfair labor practice but employers hope that by the time they lose the legal battle, they will have crushed the union.

The stakes are very high in the struggle to protect Sarah, not only for Chicago kids and teachers, but also for public education and democracy. CTU's militancy and commitment to social justice has inspired teachers and education activists world-wide. Teachers unions are often the best organized force defending public schools against privatization and policies that aim to turn classrooms into

factories producing compliant workers. CPS and Emanuel feel emboldened now by Trump's election and Illinois Governor Rauner's explicit attacks on public employee unions.

You wouldn't guess it from looking at her, but Sarah is very dangerous. She's a smart, dedicated activist speaking truth to powerful forces who want to crush the CTU so as to control Chicago's politics and the destiny of mostly poor and working class kids of color, whom it considers disposable. If you're a parent, defending Sarah matters because you want a teacher like Sarah to let you know when your kids are being hurt. If you're a teacher anywhere, this is your battle because if a school board and mayor can fire Sarah, you're not safe either – no matter how good you are or how tightly you close your classroom door. If you believe in democracy and public education, you should express your support for Sarah because if Emanuel and CPS can intimidate Chicago teachers, elites all over will try to do the same in your community, state, province, and country.

A petition in support of Sarah is being circulated. I urge you: sign it, pronto. As I'm confident CORE and the CTU leadership will explain to members, defending Sarah isn't just about CPS. It's about the future of the teaching profession, unionism, and public education in the age of Trump.

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