

Chester, Pennsylvania teachers unanimously vote to work for free

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The Chicago Tribune reported: “There are cases where teachers, until they received their September pay last week, had borrowed all they could, had no money for carfare, and were stinting themselves on their food ...

“Playing bridge at their union office, teachers wondered what had become of hard-pressed colleagues, including one assigned to a school shortly before the paychecks stopped coming. ‘She was living on graham crackers and milk,’ one player said...”

“A year later, a teacher said that, unable to make mortgage payments, she was on the verge of losing her house. ‘I am not getting younger, and I have always hated thoughts of the poorhouse.’”

The Tribune also reported “the death of a child for want of medical attention in the teacher’s straitened circumstances.

“Despite their own hardships, teachers were deeply concerned for their pupils. In the Sullivan school district, near the steel mills, teachers managed to feed and clothe needy students...”

The social conditions of 1931 read as a warning today.

On August 27, about 200 Chester Upland School District teachers voted unanimously to work without pay as the new school year opens. The extraordinary decision was also echoed by secretaries, school bus drivers, janitors and administrators, who all followed suit. The city of Chester, Pennsylvania lies just south of Philadelphia.

“None of us are here to be millionaires,” said English teacher Jennifer Archibald to the media. “We’re doing this for a purpose—a calling, if you will. And that hasn’t changed.”

Dariah Jackson, a teacher at Stetser Elementary School, told the *Christian Science Monitor*, “We all have decided to work without pay.” She started to say “until” but then corrected herself, they note. “As long as we can,” she adds. “There is no ‘until’.”

“The thought of it is very scary,” John Shelton, 60, dean at the middle school, told the *Washington Post*. “It’s mind-boggling because there’s truly uncertainty. But we are all in agreement that we will come to work, so that the children can get an education. Some of our children, this is all they have as far as safety, their next nourishing meal, people who are concerned for them. We are dedicated to these children.”

Reginald Springfield, who teaches English at Chester High School, told the WSWWS, “There is a great deal of dedication to the profession and the students. You have to have a passion for it. This is the way we feel about it.

“A crisis has been going on for the last 20 years. We don’t know

what’s going to happen. We hope the state makes the right decision. It’s all about the money,” he continued. “It’s outrageous what they are doing.”

The Chester Upland School District is the bleeding edge of the defunding of education taking place nationally. In this case, the Obama cuts to Title I (about 12 percent) and special education (another 11 percent reduction) have been compounded by draconian state cuts—some \$2.1 billion over the last five years—and then magnified by changes in state funding formulas that bankrupted the district in favor of the for-profit charter schools.

“Teachers are really heroes,” one Chester parent told the WSWWS. “It’s a thankless job in the Chester Upland schools. They face ungrateful parents and students. But the reason the staff keeps pushing is because they know the kids depend on them.”

Referring to the terrible growth of poverty that has beset Chester, a once thriving automotive and shipbuilding industrial port city, she continued, “A decent education should be available for free. [The politicians think] ‘How dare you want a decent education for children regardless of what you make a year! You’re on the welfare rolls and want a decent education? How dare you!’ It’s awful. These kids need education more than ever.

“The other issue that people haven’t mentioned,” she continued, “is how the [for-profit charter] Chester Community Charter Schools (CCCS) are classifying kids with learning disabilities. I’ve constantly heard from parents that they find any reason to classify them as learning disabled. So the child gets a label slapped on them, but the school gets \$40,000 per child, not the regular \$16,000.

“So CCCS is getting an excess of funds by putting a label across the kids. The owner is a shyster, nothing but. He is in bed with [State Representative Democrat] Thaddeus Kirkland and [Chester’s Republican Mayor] Dominic Pileggi, who runs the city with an iron fist.”

The incestuous relations between the charter industry and the state politicians are well known in the community and are a major component of the crisis. Charter school lobbyists have donated a whopping \$10 million to Pennsylvania state politicians over the last nine years.

Half of Chester’s approximately 7,000 schoolchildren attend CCCS, with most of the rest attending public schools. CCCS, legally classified as “non-profit,” is operated by a for-profit education management organization owned by Vahan Gureghian. Known for being the second-largest individual donor to former

governor Tom Corbett, Gureghian also donated another million dollars to Pennsylvania politicians and PACs (political action committees) over the past few years.

State politicians have reciprocated. Corbett named Gureghian to his education policy team and advocated for a school “voucher system.” Unsuccessful at first, he then expanded the Educational Improvement Tax Credit, which provided “scholarships” for students to attend schools outside their district. Additionally he pushed for changes in state regulations to shield charter school operators from state law requirements that they publicly disclose financial information.

A recent commission corroborated the above-quoted Chester parent’s point, finding that the for-profit charter schools were enrolling students with minor special-education needs, such as a hearing impairment, but not students with more expensive needs, such as an intellectual disability. That translates into huge funding inequities in the system between charter schools and traditional public schools. A 2014 analysis found that Pennsylvania charter schools received \$350 million for special education students but spent just \$156 million to meet their needs.

Pennsylvania’s disproportionate funding formula for special education students faced revision in 2014, but Mayor Pileggi and others, on behalf of the charter industry, engineered a deal which largely maintained the status quo. In Pennsylvania, education funds are disbursed to the districts and then allocated to charters based on the funding formula.

Throughout the state, charters are therefore subsidized to excess with millions of dollars, while directly draining resources from the public schools that have increased class sizes, laid off teachers and terminated subject areas. These measures, of course, increasingly impel parents to abandon their neighborhood schools for the charters.

“The charters are benefiting from an unfair system,” said Susan Gobreski of Education Voters PA, noting that parents in Philadelphia often wonder how charter schools can afford expenditures like art teachers while District schools cannot.

The net result for the Chester Upland School District is that they owe local charter schools about \$64 million in tuition payments. This is more than the entire amount the district receives in state school aid!

The current crisis was caused by the decision of a county judge to reject the district’s financial recovery plan and the fact that the state budget has not yet been approved. Chester Upland School district, under state control, has been awaiting a court ruling on a bid to severely reduce its payments for special education students attending charter schools and for cyber schools, a proposal backed by Democratic Governor Tom Wolf. Moreover, the state budget is at an impasse over the governor’s plan to tax shale gas drilling and use the funds to put an entirely inadequate \$400 million back into state education.

While state funds are being held up for all Pennsylvania school districts, Chester’s fiscal situation is also compounded by its underlying deficits, the result of years of deindustrialization, declining property taxes and the growth of poverty. At present Chester schools have a \$49.6 million deficit.

The final comments of Springfield should be noted, “The other

side of this is we feel there is no other option [than to work without pay]. If we go out or leave, we could face termination. You may or may not have a job. If you strike, this could mean the end of your position. There is nothing positive in that situation.”

The dedication of Chester teachers to their students is sharply contrasted to the complicity of their union, the Chester Upland Education Association, which has put forward no policy to defend the rights of teachers and staff or to prevent this vicious precedent from being reestablished.

On the contrary, CUEA President Michele Paulick reiterated the point that educators are on their own. She warned that teachers could lose their jobs if they failed to show up, because it means “you would terminate your contract with the district.”

The attitude of the union, however, was more obliging towards the charters, which they hope will eventually be a dues revenue source. “We don’t want them to close. We just want a fair formula and equal education for all of our students,” said Zeek Weil, who has been working with Chester Upland on behalf of the Pennsylvania State Education Association.

A similar cash situation occurred in 2012, at which time the union took the same paralyzing stance. The state eventually provided a one-time emergency appropriation and teachers did not miss a paycheck. Since then, other one-time cash infusions from the state kept the district on financial life-support.

The current crisis threatens to snowball. The governor’s press secretary commented, “We don’t know if the district will be able to stay open throughout the year without drastic action.”

The willingness of the Chester Upland teachers to sacrifice in defense of their students is being exploited by both the political establishment and the union. The defense of public education must be taken up independently of all the power brokers responsible for the crisis—the Republicans, Democrats and the union apparatus, who all defend the looting of public education at the hands of business interests.



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