

...Chicago teachers strike inspires unionists nationwide

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- Gives break time for nursing mothers
- Gives teachers the right to “follow” their students when school is closed; and
- Reimburses teachers up to \$250 a year for school supplies.

The tentative agreement contains union concessions too: It increases the length of the school day. Laid-off teachers will get six months severance, down from the current 12, and poorly rated teachers will not have seniority protection when layoffs take place.

The Board of Education had wanted a five-year contract, but agreed to teachers’ proposal for a three-year contract, meaning it will come up for renewal in the middle of the 2015 may-

oral campaign.

At the Sept. 20 forum in Portland, speakers described the strike as an inspiration.

“Something’s happening in this country that’s very exciting, and it’s not the union movement: It’s a workers movement,” said Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain. “What we’re seeing is the birth of community and unions coming together and creating something that’s powerful enough to push back against the 1 percent, powerful enough to push back against the mayor of Chicago.”

Gwen Sullivan, president of the Portland Teachers Association, said the same corporate reform movement that targeted Illinois teachers unions is at work in Oregon. “This is just the beginning,” Sullivan said. “Keep your eye

on some similarities with what’s happening with our own governor, and what’s happening with some of the people we call our friends.”

Roberts, the Chicago teacher, attributed the strike’s success to rank-and-file, building-by-building organizing of union members ... and the union’s careful work building community support for several years leading up to the strike.

“We’ve had a perspective that our fight is not our fight alone,” Roberts said. “We made common cause with the entire community to fight for equitable funding, to fight against school closures, against the really unequal distribution of resources inside our school system.”

It paid off: Polls showed support for striking teachers from a majority of Chicago voters — and even higher support — two-thirds — from parents with kids in the struck schools. It helped that CTU didn’t just say no to the reforms Emanuel was demanding; it articulated an alternative vision of what good education would look like, in a white paper entitled, “Schools Our Students Deserve.”

“None of us in Chicago view this as a Chicago Teachers Union struggle by itself,” Roberts said. “Unions across the country have been under attack. They’re telling us the only alternative



Chicago Teachers Union strike participant Kirstin Roberts addresses a Portland solidarity meeting via Skype. Leading the discussion at the meeting are from left to right: American Federation of Teachers-Oregon Executive Director Richard Schwarz; Northwest Oregon Labor Council Executive Secretary-Treasurer Bob Tackett; parent activist Susan Barrett of Oregon Save Our Schools; Portland Jobs with Justice Executive Director Margaret Butler; and Letter Carrier Branch 82 retiree Jamie Partridge. About 100 people attended the solidarity meeting.

Lead-up to the strike: A Portland connection

Chicago public school teachers walked off the job Sept. 10, but the stage was set for that showdown more than a year before.

In 2010 and 2011, a coalition of “reform” groups with close ties to hedge fund managers and billionaire philanthropists organized in Springfield, Illinois to pass a state law. The law weakened teacher seniority rights and job security, and required that at least 30 percent of every public school teacher’s evaluation be based on student test scores. It also required a three-fourths vote before teachers can strike, and barred the Chicago teachers union specifically from bargaining over things like class size.

Heading up that coalition was the group Stand For Children, which is headquartered in Portland.

In a remarkable video that became famous on YouTube, Jonah Edelman — Stand for Children executive director — talks for 14 minutes about how he and his allies were able to pass the law. Thanks to a “breach” between

Democratic politicians and unions — Edelman tells a friendly gathering at a Aspen Institute conference — they were able to divide, out maneuver and defeat teachers unions during a lame duck session of the Illinois Legislature.

“I can tell you there was a palpable sense of concern if not shock on the part of the teachers unions ... that we had clear political capability to potentially jam this proposal down their throats the same way pension reform had been jammed down their throats six months earlier.”

In the video, Edelman describes how Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel helped his group split teachers unions, and he gloats that Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis made a “tactical miscalculation” when she fought “to preserve her members right to strike.” “In effect,” Edelman says, smiling, “they wouldn’t have the ability to strike ... they will never be able to muster the 75 percent.”

How wrong that prediction, made in June 2011, proved to be.

is to roll over and let corporate America have its way.... We’ve just been through round one of a very long prize

fight. We gave ‘Mayor 1 percent’ a bloody nose in this round, but we have to keep coming back and fighting.”

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