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Why I stand with Chicago's teachers

by Heidi Schlumpf

NCR Today

My 3- and 4-year-olds didn't go to preschool today, but that doesn't mean they didn't learn anything. They learned about labor unions, strikes and the importance of bosses treating their workers fairly.

We live in Chicago, and, as you may have heard, Chicago Public School teachers went on strike today, for the first time in 25 years.

Our children attend a public preschool, so I am affected by this strike as a parent. Luckily for our family, we are able to accommodate our kids being out of their part-time school. I know other families are not so lucky.

I am a taxpayer, so I care about fiscal responsibility, and I recognize that governments are facing difficult choices during this recession.

However, I'm also a child of (retired) teachers, the wife of an (underemployed) teacher, and a neighbor and friend to many who teach in Chicago Public Schools. And I know that while they are fighting for their own rights and interests, they are also fighting for the children in their classrooms. Among the concessions they have won or are fighting for are the right to receive their textbooks on the first day of school (rather than waiting up to six weeks for them) and the need for a "reasonable timetable for the installation of air-conditioning in student classrooms."

They also want fair wages, good benefits and job security, especially as Mayor Rahm Emmanuel moves toward closing under-performing schools and expanding charter schools. This Salon.com columnist rightly asks, if charter schools are the solution, why aren't suburban districts rushing to have them? (She also makes a number of other good points; her column is worth a read.)

A year and a half ago, I wrote about the teachers and other union workers protesting and striking in Wisconsin over Gov. Scott Walker's move to take away collective bargaining rights. As I said then,

"I've also been scratching my head at those who think that teachers, social workers, nurses and other public workers should be 'brought down' to the same level as workers in the public sector who have had to accept wage cuts and increases in their contributions to their health insurance and retirement plans. Seems we've all accepted this as the 'new normal,' and many are resentful that others haven't had to suffer like they have. Wouldn't it be better if at least some workers maintained the advantages unions worked for--in the hope that all workers might get these back some day?"

As a Catholic, I'm proud that the church has supported the rights of workers, including the right to strike. Unfortunately, the only news I've heard from Chicago's Cardinal Francis George (admittedly sick with cancer) and the Archdiocese of Chicago is that that they "have seats available at some [Catholic] schools."

I'm grateful for the hard work of public school teachers, especially those who work with challenging populations and situations, such as in many Chicago schools. I'm praying this can be resolved fairly--and soon.

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