

‘Rahm got rolled’

By Robby Soave

September 24th, 2012

Education reform experts worried that Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel made too many concessions in the deal that ended the city’s teachers’ strike last week.

“Rahm got rolled,” wrote Mike Petrilli, vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, in an e-mail to The Daily Caller News Foundation. “The mayor had the law, the national press, and the interests of Chicago’s kids on his side. And he couldn’t get the union to agree to much more than to comply with state requirements on teacher evaluations.”

Joy Pullmann, managing editor of School Reform News, agreed.

“In my estimation, the strike and its results offer no resolution for the enormous challenges Chicago taxpayers and K-12 students face,” she said in an e-mail to The DC News Foundation. “It was essentially a fireworks show, with the kids getting burned.”

The strike deal will increase the average public school teacher’s salary to about \$100,000 in the next four years; in exchange, teachers agreed to a longer school day and modest accountability reforms that tie teacher evaluations to students’ standardized test scores.

Neither side was entirely pleased – Emanuel wanted tougher merit-based evaluations, while the union wanted none at all – but most were glad to see an end to a strike that had tested the collective patience of 350,000 public schoolchildren and their parents.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, was less than impressed with the deal, and called it “rearranging Titanic deck chairs.”

“The results of this strike are meaningless in the grand scheme of things,” he wrote in an e-mail to the DC News Foundation. “Teacher assessment based a little more on student test scores, slightly longer school days – all just rearranging Titanic deck chairs.”

“As long as schooling is a government monopoly it will take forever to get minor tweaks, and the special interests—especially the employees we want to hold accountable—will hold most of the power.” McCluskey continued. “That’s why attaining universal, private-school choice should be our only reform target.”

But Rachel Unterman, an activist and member of Occupy Chicago, was pleased that the teachers prevailed on behalf of union workers nationwide.

“The teachers definitely won the strike,” she said in an interview with The DC News Foundation. “They won it not just for a better contract for the next few years, but also for unions everywhere.”

“The Chicago symphony orchestra has now walked out, and I think we will continue seeing working people standing up for themselves,” Unterman continued. “[The teachers] won a lot of the main points they were working toward in terms of having a better working environment for teachers and a better learning environment for students.”

Alex Uzarowicz, a student journalist at Knox College, a private liberal arts college in Illinois, wrote a column opposing the strike and the Chicago teachers’ high salaries. He was surprised to find his fellow students — who are predominantly liberal — agreeing with him.

“The vast majority of people who approached me after reading my column said that they really agree with what I wrote,” he said in an interview with The DC News Foundation. “This is Rahm Emanuel we’re talking about, and Barack Obama supports teacher evaluations along with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. This is not like a ‘crazy’ Chris Christie kind of assault on teachers. It’s coming from the left. I think it will be difficult to make the argument that this is a rightwing agenda for slashing education.”

The Chicago Teachers Union did not respond to requests for comment.