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## Duncan, Troutman blunt rage at Englewood meeting

By Jesse Sharkey

The "Town Hall Meeting" at Chicago's Englewood High School on April 14, 2005, was filled with opponents of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) plan to close Englewood High School, first by ending enrollment of 9th graders in September 2005.

The plan has been advanced by schools Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan over the opposition of most members of the community and the school's staff and students. Threats from the school's principal have failed to keep students and teachers "in line" as their school is destroyed. Duncan's April 14 appearance at Englewood was two months late, according to most community members and school staff, while school board president Michael Scott, who was also supposed to be present at the meeting, was missing.

20th Ward Alderman Arenda Troutman, who received special favors from the Duncan administration for capital projects in her ward, tried to shout down dissidents who objected to her plan to have all questions screened by her aides. Substance photo by George N. Schmidt.

Most of the voices opposed to Duncan were ignored because of an agenda (see below) prepared in advance of the meeting by the local alderman. That agenda prevented direct criticism of the Englewood closing plan and funneled audience questions through Alderman Arenda Troutman. Troutman is a Duncan ally who has received many favors from the Chicago Board of Education.

More than 250 people attended the April 14 Englewood meeting, but they quickly discovered that the agenda prepared by Alderman Arenda Troutman was not going to allow comments critical of the "done deal" of schools CEO Arne Duncan. Substance photo by George N. Schmidt.

Arne Duncan, who began the meeting by asking the audience to, "work together to do what is best for our children" did most of the speaking.

Judging by their reactions, the vast majority of the audience, which numbered about two hundred fifty, were opponents of the proposed school closing from the community, the student body, and the school's staff.

For example, when Duncan said, "these decisions [to close Englewood] are very, very tough and not ones that we take lightly," many members of the audience groaned or booed. People called out from their seats, "give us a chance," and "you failed us." During public hearings on the Englewood plan on February 10, more than 40 people opposed Duncan's proposal and no one spoke in favor of it. They pointed out that the school didn't even have current textbooks for its students. Student protests and speakers at Board of Education meetings continued making the same point: Englewood didn't fail; CPS failed the people of Englewood.

However, few of these opinions were heard in detail at the April meeting because 20th ward Alderman Arenda Troutman kept a tight rein on the meeting — even shouting down almost everyone who tried to question Duncan directly.

While the April 14 meeting was going on, Hosannah Mahaley, a \$100,000-a-year aide to Chicago Board of Education President Michael Scott, tried to convince Englewood student leader Keith Nellum to withdraw his criticisms of the school closing plan. Mahaley offered to allow Nellum's 8th grade brother the right to attend any Chicago high school, including the academic magnet schools, after Nellum testified at a school board meeting that his brother would face possible violence if he had to attend Robeson High School instead of Englewood. Like many of the highest paid officials at the school board, Mahaley came to her lucrative career in education from Chicago's City Hall, where she once worked for Mayor Richard M. Daley. Substance photo by George N. Schmidt.

Many audience members who represented important constituents were never heard from, including Chicago Teachers Union president Marilyn Stewart who is an Englewood High School graduate.

Audience members were allowed to write their questions on slip of paper whereupon Troutman picked through the slips and read the questions. Duncan then took as much time as he liked to answer.

On a couple of occasions individuals tried to challenge Troutman's domination of the meeting — but none of attempts were successful.

For example, at one point in the meeting Englewood union delegate Jackson Potter, whose hand was ignored for more than ten minutes, went to the front of the room and pointed out that CTU president, Marilyn Stewart was in the room.

But Stewart waved him off and Troutman began to shout about maintaining an orderly meeting. No one else in the audience reacted and the opportunity had passed. Principal Geraldine Jackson went through the audience at Duncan's behest threatening dissident teachers and students with disciplinary action.

An hour and forty-two minutes into the two hour meeting Troutman said, "You can come to the mike if you want to come up and ask questions."

Rev Hood of ACORN then spoke—but led his contingent out of the auditorium when it became clear that Duncan, who finally had to respond to people as opposed to slips of paper, would not answer questions honestly.

Teachers from Englewood were leading the struggle to save the school, despite threats to their jobs. But they also asked Substance to address an apparent contradiction: on the one hand our union faces its most serious challenge in a generation, while on the other hand, the internal debate in the union is dominated by hostile camps which attack each other with more vigor and inventiveness than is good for our union.

In April, the delegate from another Englewood school slated for closing — Bunche elementary — made an impassioned plea on the floor of the union meeting. Yet the floor of the House of Delegates meetings is usually taken up with charges and counter-charges of financial mismanagement which are aimed at embarrassing opponents, followed by counter-attacks which curtail democracy within the union. Too often meetings are not characterized by a real discussion of how we build a militant union that can defend public education in Chicago, but by sectarian point scoring. Teachers at the schools under attack have told Substance that they don't think the question of who leads our union is irrelevant, or that criticism of leadership is irresponsible. All healthy unions have internal debate, disagreement, and competition for leadership. But the real test of a union leadership is whether it can mobilize the membership to defend our interests in the face of a determined attack by our employer. The situation we are facing now calls for all sides to show their capacity to lead by organizing teachers, staff, and community members and putting them into motion against Renaissance 2010. Standing on the sidelines, criticizing others, or looking busy will not do.

The CTU has a lot of work to do on Ren 2010. We have to figure out a way to coordinate the various progressive forces into a movement that will fight to defend public education. Right now the community organizations, LSC's, parent advocate groups, progressive lawmakers, school unions, and so on are poorly coordinated, and lack clear, confident arguments that resonate in public. The CTU is the key to energizing a city-wide coalition because of its size, resources, and power. Neighborhood organizations like Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) have done tremendous work opposing Ren 2010, and their work is a model. But it is the CTU that has the base in schools across Chicago to lead this fight. What's more, the CTU ultimately has

a power which other groups do not have: we can make contract demands and go on strike to win them.

The CTU's biggest weakness right now is that we lack a sizable core of activists that understand the issues in Ren 2010 and who are actively organizing in our schools. The goal of the committee on Renaissance 2010 is to activate this rank and file core. We are only at the beginning of that process. The committee contains teachers on all sides of the PACT/UPC/CEEC divide. The protest picket that we organized on the eve of the Feb 23rd BOE vote grew out of a suggestion by rank-and-file teachers on the Renaissance 2010 Committee together with the delegate at Bunche Elementary. At its high point the picket had about two-hundred and fifty people, according to participants. Full busses came from Bunche and Englewood.

If nothing more is done by June, hundreds of school staff and thousands of children will be destroyed by the school closings currently on the agenda of the Chicago Board of Education and Chicago's mayor. The in-fighting within the Chicago Teachers Union at that point will not only be unseemly, but downright obscene.