

Chicago mayoral candidates promise intensified attacks on working class

Kristina Betinis, Alexander Fangmann
10 February 2011

On February 22, Chicago will elect a mayor to replace the retiring 21-year incumbent, Richard Daley. The major candidates, all Democrats, agree that the working class must foot the bill for the city's estimated \$1 billion deficit. The victor will enforce ruthless cuts on Chicago's 3 million residents, who are already suffering through the worst social crisis in living memory.

The candidate who has garnered the lion's share of attention—and the most corporate backing—is Rahm Emanuel, who most recently served as President Obama's White House chief of staff. Emanuel has promised to ruthlessly slash the city budget at the expense of city workers, stating that “in attacking our budget deficit, there must be no sacred cows.”

Among these “sacred cows” are the retirement pensions of public employees. Emanuel is proposing developing a two-tier system that would substantially cut pensions to most city workers, and increasing retirement ages.

He has also pledged to continue the attack on public education begun under Daley and former Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan, who now serves as Obama's education secretary and is credited with developing the “Race to the Top” initiative that pits states and school districts against each other for paltry funding doled out based on “success” at eliminating work rules and promoting charter schools.

A central component of Emanuel's education plan for Chicago is a ban on teachers' right to strike. Emanuel said to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, “As we have [rules against strikes] for police and firefighters, I would have it for teachers because they provide an essential service.” Legislation currently before the state's General Assembly would eliminate teachers' right to strike. With organized resistance thus criminalized, Emanuel will proceed to more comprehensive attacks on teachers' wages and working conditions, in line with Obama's Race to the Top program.

Emanuel is linked closely both to the White House and to powerful financial interests. He has hired former Obama campaign strategist David Axelrod's firm to manage his campaign. And Emanuel is backed by Mayor Daley, whose brother William, a former executive at JPMorgan Chase, has been installed as Emanuel's replacement as White House chief

of staff.

A long-time Democratic Party operative of national standing, Emanuel was an advisor and strategist for Bill Clinton during the latter's first presidential primary campaign. Upon leaving the Clinton White House in 1998, Emanuel began a new career in finance, taking in an astonishing \$16 million in under three years.

He is by far the best funded of the candidates. According to a report in the *Chicago Tribune*, Emanuel has collected a total of \$11.8 million. The *Tribune* also reports that, although he raised \$1 million in Hollywood, nearly half of Emanuel's campaign donations came from the finance and investment community.

The Chicago Mercantile Exchange gave Emanuel \$200,000 and Chicago Board Options Exchange contributed \$25,000. Other high-profile contributors include Ken Griffin, founder of Citadel Investment Group and board member of The Chicago Public Education Fund, the venture capital firm invested in Chicago schools, and Robert Rubin, former US Secretary of the Treasury and former executive at Citigroup and Goldman Sachs.

One anonymous investment manager told the *Tribune*, “a lot of us have known Rahm for years, from his days in the private equity business.”

Emanuel's candidacy withstood an anti-democratic effort to remove his name from the ballot. Litigants with backing from the Republican Party had sought to remove him because Emanuel lived in Washington, D.C. for the past year. The back-and-forth case was ultimately decided in favor of Emanuel, who is himself no friend of ballot access or democratic rights. The Democrats and Republicans in Illinois routinely collude with each other to block ballot access for candidates representing other political parties, including the Socialist Equality Party.

While Emanuel has been anointed the presumptive victor by the media and the most powerful elements in the Democratic Party machine, all the candidates in the race support deep cuts to city services and tout their subservience to big business.

Gery Chico, a lawyer who recently resigned as president of the board of trustees of the City Colleges of Chicago, is another candidate with close ties to Daley. A long-time associate of the current mayor, Chico became Daley's deputy chief of staff in

1991, and was soon promoted to full chief of staff. Daley then appointed him in 1995 to head the Chicago Public Schools board, a position Chico held until 2001. Under Chico, CPS began the closures and privatization that inspired Obama's federal school "reforms." Meanwhile, during his four years as CPS president, the law firm where Chico was managing partner negotiated over \$577 million in contracts for its clients with CPS, the *Chicago Tribune* reports.

Chico's campaign has focused on "modernizing" city services. In an interview with *Crain's Chicago Business*, he claimed that Chicago has not been aggressive enough in luring businesses to the city, and laid out a program for broad deregulation and taxes and fee cuts for business. Chico also advocated giving away disused city properties to corporations as an inducement for moving their operations to Chicago.

Like his opponents, Chico would rely on labor leaders to manage the politically explosive task of gutting municipal employee pensions. "I believe in pension reform," Chico said. "We need to have pension reform... I will do it by personally leading the negotiation... If you come on too strong with positions and in telling tough truths, you might just drive this city into a series of strikes, and then nobody's happy."

Chico has collected campaign contributions totaling \$2.4 million. Among those contributions are "tens of thousands from several current or current former clients" of his law firm "who do business with city hall," according to the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

Carol Moseley-Braun, the former US Senator and ambassador to New Zealand, has identified "nonessential" services and subsidies to be cut, and supports the conversion of public schools to casinos for investors. Remarkably, the Chicago media has labeled Moseley-Braun as the "left wing" of the candidates in contention.

Moseley-Braun has "only" taken in around \$446,000 for her campaign, with the top contribution being a \$100,000 check from CEO John Rogers of Ariel Capital Management, a firm that has taken more than \$10 million in fees from managing city pension investments. Ariel Capital Management is also represented on the board of the venture capital fund "investing" in Chicago public schools.

Other candidacies—those of Miguel del Valle, William "Dock" Walls, and Patricia Van Pelt Watkins—represent in one way or another the dead end of identity politics. None of these candidates expects to win, and they articulate no significant differences with the leading three candidates. Their purpose in running is two-fold: first, to keep Chicago's workers tied to the Democratic Party, and second, to trade whatever political influence they manage to gain for influence and perks from city hall.

Del Valle, the first Latino to be elected city clerk, also served as chairman of Harold Washington's Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs. Appealing to middle class minority layers for "community support," he advocates increasing the number of

police and shrinking the size of city government. As del Valle said to the *Chicago Tribune* Editorial Board, he wants to "cut personnel deeply."

Walls, a former aide to Harold Washington and former national political director of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH organization, supports the declaration of a city "state of emergency" which would put all police on the streets in a semi-military show of force. He has also called for a freeze on all "non-essential" infrastructure spending, including the paving of streets, curbs, and alleys.

Chicago's corporate and financial elite profited immensely during Daley's administration, which—backed by the trade unions and African American and Latino "community groups"—saw the near-total suppression of working class struggle. Douglas Whitley, CEO of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce told *Crain's Chicago Business* that "the biggest advantage that Mayor Daley had with the business community was confidence and stability," and that "the biggest issue going forward is a lack of confidence and stability." In other words, Daley's backers in the business community fear that the eruption of major working class struggles in the coming years may break the stranglehold the Democratic Party has wielded on Chicago since the 1920s.

Indeed, the Chicago mayoral race provides a concentrated expression of the Democratic Party as a whole—controlled entirely by powerful financial interests, driven to attack the living standards of the working class, and virtually devoid of politics except for the bankrupt perspective of identity politics.

Chicago's workers must break once and for all from this corrupt apparatus and mobilize their immense social power behind an independent political perspective: the fight for socialism and the right to good jobs, housing, education, and culture.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact