

The ISO and the betrayal of the Chicago teachers

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The International Socialist Organization bears direct political responsibility for a major attack against 200,000 teachers in Illinois. The leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which the ISO promoted and whose vice president is a leading ISO member, joined with the Democratic Party in Illinois to pass a bill that strips teachers of long-held rights and benefits and severely limits their right to strike.

This betrayal is a crucial experience of the working class in the deceitful politics of the middle-class pseudo-left. The ISO styles itself as a socialist organization and a force to lead workers' struggles. However, it disorients these struggles because it speaks for and defends the interests of an anti-working-class layer of the affluent middle class.

During the mass protests in Wisconsin earlier this year, the ISO promoted and aligned itself with the trade union apparatus and the Democratic Party to help strangle the mass movement against Republican Governor Scott Walker's attack on public employees.

The working class can mount an effective struggle only if it understands and rejects the pseudo-left politics of the ISO, whose real attitude towards working people is epitomized by its support for the attack on Chicago teachers.

The CTU's April 12 endorsement of the Illinois bill was a damning exposure of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), a union faction led by current CTU President Karen Lewis and ISO member Jesse Sharkey, the vice president of the 30,000-member union. The CORE group, which unseated long-time incumbents in a union election last June, was hailed by the ISO as consisting of militants and "teacher union reformers" who were determined to stand up to the political and corporate forces attacking public education.

Less than a year later, Lewis joined the leaders of the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Illinois Education Association at an April 14 press conference to endorse the anti-teacher bill and praise Illinois Democrats for passing "the most significant, bold and comprehensive reforms in education in more than 40 years."

Illinois Senate Bill 7 (SB7)—soon to be signed into law by Democratic Governor Pat Quinn—expands the use of standardized tests to fire teachers without regard to seniority or tenure. It gives school districts the power to add extra hours to the school day and weeks to the school year without compensation. The bill explicitly prohibits Chicago's 30,000 teachers from striking until four months of negotiations are concluded and a special arbitration panel issues a ruling. Even if these hurdles are met, the CTU must give a 10-day notice and get 75 percent of its members, instead of a simple majority, to approve a walkout.

As these details emerged, Sharkey and the ISO scrambled to defend the CTU from the anger of rank-and-file teachers. At an April 25

meeting of CORE—from which Lewis was conspicuously absent—the ISO leader claimed the union had failed to read the "fine print" in the legislation!

"The CTU said we would not go for an attack on our collective bargaining rights, but on closer examination we see that's exactly what it is," Sharkey admitted. Saying it was a "mistake" to endorse the bill, he nevertheless urged delegates not to "scapegoat Karen (Lewis)."

According to one account, Sharkey promised that the CTU would "unwind this thing." The "union-busting aspects of it" would be removed, he said, in order to "preserve the spirit of the deal." Sharkey then reportedly told delegates not to say anything publicly about the union's plan to change its position on SB 7, saying the CTU had first to "give cover" to the Democrats with whom it had worked for months to reach the "compromise."

What was the "spirit of the deal" Sharkey was so anxious to preserve? Like the rest of the union executives, the ISO leader had no problem backing longer hours with no pay and standardized tests to victimize and fire teachers. The union's overriding concern was maintaining good relations with the Democratic Party, which generally tries to keep the unions on board, protecting their legal status and the dues check-off under which union dues is automatically deducted from workers' paychecks. This facilitates the role of the unions in collaborating in attacks on the working class.

As the exposure of this sellout threatened to provoke opposition from teachers and damage the union's relations with the Democrats, Sharkey and the ISO did everything they could to conceal the details of the bill from rank-and-file teachers.

At first, the ISO's publication *Socialist Worker* kept silent about the CTU's decision to back the bill. But as Sharkey was swinging into action to defend the betrayal and deflect the anger of teachers, *Socialist Worker* published an article on April 21 titled "A Crisis for Teachers Union Reformers?"

Predictably, the ISO took no political responsibility for promoting CORE and gave no account of the actions of ISO member Sharkey. Instead, *Socialist Worker* labor editor Lee Sustar rebuked Lewis for supposedly acting unilaterally, treating the union's endorsement as a "personal decision," and failing to tell union delegates that she had already agreed to support the legislation when she spoke to them via teleconference on April 13.

The CORE group had been "shocked" by the endorsement, Sustar claimed. In fact, this outcome was entirely predictable. Like the faction it deposed, the new CTU leadership was completely tied to the Democratic Party, had endorsed Quinn for governor, and participated in months of negotiations with state Democrats to prepare the bill

even as Democrats in Chicago and in the Obama administration were escalating their assault on teachers. All this time, the ISO continued to paint CORE leaders as militants.

The ISO supported cutting a deal with the Democrats, Sustar makes clear. He writes: “Certainly, the final education legislation could have been even worse had Lewis and the CTU stayed away from negotiations altogether.” But once the character of the bill had become evident, he declares, Lewis should have rejected it. Instead, she endorsed and praised it, “thereby confusing and disarming CTU members,” Sustar states. He does not mention that the ISO did the very same thing.

Making clear that the ISO has no intention of allowing a brazen betrayal of Chicago teachers to stand in the way of its relations with Lewis, Sustar goes on to alibi for the CTU president and the rest of the union leadership. Their actions, he writes, were “not the problems of individuals,” but the “result of the vast pressure placed on teachers unions by corporate reformers and the bipartisan attack on public-sector labor.”

The ISO, in reality, fully supported this attack on the teachers, which, in its own words, was necessary to preserve the “spirit of the deal.” What was the deal? Backing the attacks on the teachers demanded by the Democratic Party and big business in return for safeguards for the status and income of the union officialdom.

Aware, however, that the provisions of the bill were so onerous as to undermine the credibility of ISO-supported “union reformers” in Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities, Sustar urged the CTU to revoke its endorsement of the measure.

As anger against the union spread, the CTU executive board on May 2 passed a resolution distancing itself from SB7 and pledging, as Sharkey had suggested, to lobby Democrats to “remove anti-union collective bargaining restrictions of the bill.” Two days later, union delegates followed suit. Sarah Chambers, a “left activist” and CORE supporter who organized the delegate vote, assured the *Labor Notes* publication that the vote was not a disavowal of Lewis and the CTU leadership. “Most people realize the pressure we’re under,” she said. She failed to explain why the so-called union “reformers” respond only to the pressure from the ruling class and the political establishment, and not to the pressure from workers demanding a fight to defend their interests.

The “union-busting” parts of the bill the CTU officials set out to remove were not the streamlined process to fire teachers or the unpaid hours of extra labor. They targeted only those aspects that threatened the interests of the union apparatus. The response of both the CTU and the ISO to workers’ opposition was to manipulate it to benefit the union at the direct expense of the teachers.

The ISO immediately hailed this face-saving maneuver. “By clearly opposing SB 7,” Sustar wrote on May 5, the “CTU’s executive board and delegates have taken an important first step in preparing their members for the inevitable showdown with the next mayor.”

Behind the scenes, the CTU resumed secret discussions with the Democrats to repackage the bill. Three weeks later, on May 31, the state House voted 116-0 for a “trailer bill” that retained all of the anti-teacher measures but included some changes sought by the CTU.

This included retaining the ability to file complaints with the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board—a process that entangles teachers in drawn-out, fruitless legal proceedings. The reworded bill requires a 75 percent strike authorization vote from “eligible” members, rather than “all members,” which would include retirees and teachers who pay fees but are not union members. This means little since the CTU

itself has all but banned strikes, having not called one in nearly a quarter of a century.

With the reworked bill in hand, CTU President Lewis declared: “Chicago educators’ collective bargaining rights remain intact.” She showered praise on state Senator Kimberly Lightford—the sponsor of SB7—for “her leadership and stewardship.”

The whole sordid exercise was aimed at covering up the betrayal and selling the deal as a “legislative victory” for teachers, while preparing for the next betrayal. Having participated in this farce, the ISO kept silent on the renewed union endorsement of the anti-teacher bill.

This experience is an object lesson, not only for teachers but for the entire working class. There is nothing “left” about organizations like the ISO, which promote and with increasing frequency playing leading roles in trade union organizations that collaborate in the destruction of workers’ jobs, living standards and basic rights.

The betrayal in Chicago is not a mistake or aberration, but the inevitable outcome the ISO’s integration into the union bureaucracy and its orientation to the Democratic Party. Far from seeking to break workers from the influence of the Democrats, fighting for socialism and the political independence of the working class, the ISO works to reinforce the influence of this capitalist party.

This has been demonstrated ever more openly over the last few years, from the ISO’s promotion of Obama in the 2008 elections to its collaboration with the Wisconsin Democrats during the mass protests earlier this year.

Once the ISO attains high-level positions in the unions, as in the CTU, the anti-working class content of its politics emerges in the form of direct betrayals of the workers.

In the final analysis, the ISO and similar movements speak for sections of the upper-middle class—former student protesters-turned-academics, lawyers, journalists, advisors to the Democratic Party on the environment, identity politics and other lifestyle concerns, and trade union officials—who have benefited in income and social status from the unrelenting attack on the working class over the last three decades.

Unable as of yet to obtain positions in government, as its counterparts in Europe have done, the middle-class “left” in the US is increasingly finding its cherished “political space” within the trade union apparatus. Along with this come bloated salaries and expense accounts that give Jesse Sharkey and other ex-radicals a significant material interest in preventing workers from breaking with these right-wing organizations.

The relationship between the Democratic Party and the official unions on the one side, and the interests of teachers and the working class on the other, is one of irreconcilable class opposition. The ISO defends the former, and therefore—despite its phony “left” phrases—objectively lines up against the workers. The events in Chicago are a case in point.



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