

Chicago teachers vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike

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On June 11, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) released the results of the strike authorization vote conducted last week. The overwhelming vote in favor underscored the deep opposition of teachers to the attack on public education spearheaded by Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel with the full backing of the Obama administration.

According to the CTU, 89.73 percent of its members voted yes, out of a total membership of 26,502. Only 1.82 percent voted no, with the remainder either not voting or casting spoiled ballots. The vote cleared the 75 percent of the membership requirement established in state law last year by the anti-teacher legislation previously known as Senate Bill 7 (SB 7).

The strong support for a strike is a result of a long series of attacks on public education and teachers' living standards and conditions. Since 2001, Chicago Public School (CPS) has closed more than 100 public schools, turning many over to charter school management and converting others into military academies. The so-called turnaround process for schools that are reopened under different management includes the firing of all teachers and staff. More than 6,000 teachers have lost their jobs over the past 10 years. This year, Mayor Emanuel also rescinded a scheduled 4 percent pay increase.

While teachers are determined to oppose these attacks, the CTU has no intention of conducting any serious struggle. In large measure, the strike vote was aimed at letting off steam and concealing the union's own record of collaborating with state Democrats and Republicans against teachers and public education.

In April 2011, the CTU, along with the Illinois Education Association (IEA), was deeply involved in the crafting of SB 7. In addition to undermining the right to strike, the bill also grants the CPS board the

power to extend the length of school days and academic years, shortens the time required to notify teachers of layoffs, makes tenure more difficult to achieve, and eradicates tenure rights by tying layoffs to a vague definition of "performance," rather than seniority.

In return for backing the attacks demanded by the Democratic Party and big business, the CTU and other unions were given certain safeguards for the status and income of the union officialdom.

On a national scale, the CTU's parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has collaborated with Obama and his education secretary—former CPS CEO Arne Duncan—in implementing merit pay, the destruction of seniority and other protections, and school privatization. Asking only that "school reform be done with us, not against us," the AFT has worked with and accepted funding from such enemies of public education as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

In June 2010, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) won the leadership of the CTU from the discredited incumbent faction by claiming it would reverse the collaboration and concessions that have been the hallmark of the union since the late 1980s. This effort was supported by the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which portrayed CORE as "militants" and "teacher union reformers." ISO member Jesse Sharkey is a leading CORE member and currently the vice president of the CTU.

Far from transforming the CTU into a fighting organization, Sharkey and the ISO have worked to provide the union with a "left" cover for its continued betrayal of teachers. This included defending CTU leadership after it came to light that CTU president Karen Lewis and others were involved in the drafting of Senate Bill 7. Afterwards, the ISO leader—who never

acknowledged his own role in this sellout—claimed the CTU had failed to read the “fine print” in the anti-teacher legislation and “mistakenly” supported the deal.

The ISO has also hailed protest stunts the CTU has called with Democratic Party front men like Jesse Jackson as “social unionism,” while concealing from teachers and the working class as a whole the significance of the union’s political collaboration with and support for this big business party, including its endorsement of Illinois Governor Patrick Quinn.

On June 11, Mark Hannan wrote on ISO web site *socialistworker.org*, “The CTU’s struggle is a challenge to federal policies initiated by George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind law and continued by Barack Obama.... In taking a stand against these attacks, Chicago’s teachers have shown courage and determination in fighting for quality public education for all. Everyone who supports this goal should stand with the CTU and join them in this struggle.”

How it is possible to fight the attack on public education by supporting the CTU—which is explicitly in an alliance with the Democratic Party that is spearheading this assault—the ISO does not bother to say.

Above all, the ISO seeks to uphold the authority of the CTU and by extension the Democratic Party over rank-and-file teachers and prevent any independent initiative by teachers to defend their jobs and living standards. To do this, the ISO peddles the lie that the interests of the CTU apparatus and those of the teachers are the same.

The CTU has not called a strike in more than 25 years. In the unlikely event that it did, it would only be aimed at containing teachers’ opposition within a tight straitjacket while behind the scenes it negotiates with school authorities and Mayor Emanuel to close the \$600-\$700 million CPS budget deficit.

Any struggle to defend teachers and public education necessarily entails a direct conflict with the CTU, Mayor Emanuel and the Obama administration. New organizations of struggle, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party and controlled by rank-and-file teachers, parents and students, must be formed to fight for the widest industrial mobilization of the working class in Chicago to defend and vastly improve public education and the conditions of teachers.

There are ample resources to guarantee the social right to high-quality education for all. But this requires breaking the dictatorial grip of the banks and big business over economic and political life. To achieve this, the working class will have to build a mass political party of its own based on socialism and the fight to meet human needs first, not private profit.

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