

Chicago Teachers Union agrees to lengthening of the school day

Alexander Fangmann
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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) announced on July 24 the conclusion of a binding Interim Agreement that will result in a lengthening of the school day close to what had been sought by Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Far from being a great victory, as proclaimed by the CTU and its allies among the pseudo-left and liberal milieu, the agreement is in fact a sellout of teachers and lays the ground for further concessions.

The main issue covered by the interim agreement is the proposed lengthening of the school day championed by the Democratic mayor. School “reform” legislation passed last year in Illinois—with the full cooperation of the CTU—gave CPS the power to unilaterally impose a longer school day. Emanuel intended to take advantage of that new power by lengthening the school day by approximately 20 percent, while granting only a 2 percent raise to teachers in compensation, despite having recently rescinded a contractually expected 4 percent raise.

The Interim Agreement lengthens the day from 5 hours and 45 minutes to 7 hours for elementary school students, and from 7 hours to 7 hours and 30 minutes for high school students. Though the work day remains the same length for most elementary school teachers, high school teachers will be compelled to work an additional 14 minutes per day uncompensated—over an hour per week—even though teachers already routinely put in unpaid hours and purchase needed supplies out of their own pockets.

By accepting the longer school day, the CTU fully endorses the Democrats’ claim that the crisis in education is the result of teachers not working long or hard enough, blocking any struggle against the real causes.

At a CTU press conference announcing the

agreement, union president Karen Lewis described the agreement as “a win for students, teachers, paraprofessionals, and clinicians.” This was echoed by commentators in the bourgeois media, who have widely described the agreement as a victory for both sides and taken it as a sign that a teachers’ strike has been averted.

The International Socialist Organization (ISO)—represented in the leadership of the CTU through its member Jesse Sharkey, the vice president of the union—published an article on the socialistworker.org web site entitled “Rahm blinks first in battle with teachers.” In that piece, authors Lee Sustar and Nicole Colson describe the agreement as a “stinging defeat” for Emanuel. They claim it was the result of pressure put on Emanuel through the organization of rallies, marches, and protests, as well as a strike authorization vote approved by 90 percent of the CTU membership.

The sentiment that the CTU delivered a major victory to teachers was expressed by a variety of pseudo-left or liberal groups and individuals, including Labor Notes, who called the agreement a “major victory,” and Diane Ravitch, who said it was a “stunning victory.”

In making these statements, the ISO and Labor Notes are attempting to prevent a rebellion of teachers against the CTU, which would be the natural reaction of the rank-and-file teachers were they to learn of the real complicity the union has in these attacks upon them. By keeping teachers within the CTU, these organizations also ultimately seek to prevent any real struggle against the policies of Emanuel and the Democratic Party.

A closer look at the Interim Agreement makes clear that any claims of victory are a complete farce. Much attention has centered on the opening up of 477.5 teaching positions to teachers previously laid off. In the first place, the number of positions restored by the

agreement is paltry in comparison to the number of teachers who have lost their jobs in recent years. Just this year, 850 teachers were laid off, apparently due to lower school enrollments, “turnarounds,” and closings. Approximately 750 layoffs occurred in 2010 and another 1,000 in 2011.

Even though many of those teachers were fired illegally, in violation of tenure and seniority rights, the CTU refused to mount any serious defense. Instead, it engaged in a lawsuit aimed at giving laid off teachers the right to be recalled if and when positions open up again.

Although the CTU claims credit for establishing in this agreement a precedent for teachers to be recalled, it is no such thing, and the specific details for rehiring laid off teachers represent major concessions to CPS. Teachers eligible to be rehired include only those laid off during the past three years. Besides that, their last performance rating must have been “satisfactory” or better, and principals are only required to hire a laid off teacher if three or more of them apply to one of the open positions.

More astounding is the provision that teachers hired to these positions will only be appointed on an “interim” basis, and can be fired after their first semester. If this is done, the principal of a school can then bring in a new teacher from the pool, who can then also be replaced after a semester. Abuse of such a mechanism seems all too likely, especially in light of widespread abuse of the power granted to principals to select which teachers will be laid off in order to meet budget reduction requirements.

The union “victory,”—more appropriately a travesty—in the end amounts to the possible rehiring of less than 20 percent of teachers laid off in the past three years, to positions with absolutely no job security.

While the CTU claims it is still intent on negotiating pay increases for teachers, CPS had previously announced a budget deficit of \$665 million for the upcoming school year. It intends to close this gap through the spending of all \$431 million of the district’s cash reserves in addition to an increase in property taxes. The new positions called for in the agreement are estimated to add another \$40-\$50 million to the budget.

By lying to teachers and declaring a win at this early stage in negotiations, the CTU works to defuse the

militant mood among rank and file teachers that was displayed in the overwhelming approval of the strike vote, in preparation of further concessions. Through this falsification, they line up with the ruling class against teachers.



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