

SEP candidate campaigns among Chicago teachers

A campaign team
28 August 2012

SEP vice presidential candidate Phyllis Scherrer and a campaign team spoke to Chicago teachers at an informational picket outside of a middle school over the weekend, discussing the political issues in the attack on teachers and public education.

There is immense opposition to the attack by the administration of Democratic Party Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel on teachers and public education. In current negotiations, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is demanding a cut in real wages, increased health care costs, attacks on job security and seniority, increased hours and “merit pay.” Teachers have overwhelmingly backed strike authorization.

The Chicago Teachers Union, which is run by a “left” faction that includes members of the International Socialist Organization, is working systematically to contain opposition and prevent it from developing into a struggle against the Emanuel administration. Last month, the union and CPS reached an “interim agreement” that includes a lengthening of the school day without pay and the rehiring of a small number of teachers recently laid off, who will be subject to arbitrary dismissal.

On Friday, the CTU chose not to file a 10-day strike notice in time to allow a walkout at the beginning of the school year. CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey—a member of the ISO—made clear the determination of the union to maintain the authority of Emanuel, the former chief of staff of president Obama, when he declared, “If the mayor wants to come in and put his political weight behind getting CPS off its extreme positions, that will help settle the contract. We will sit anywhere and talk.”

If the CTU ends up calling a strike, it will be with the aim of demoralizing teachers to allow the union to push through a concessions deal reached with Emanuel and the CPS.

Scherrer and the SEP intervened to advance an independent working-class perspective for Chicago teachers. They distributed a newsletter containing Scherrer’s statement, “Workers should defend teacher tenure!”, along with the article “Chicago Teachers Union agrees to lengthening of the school day” and an exchange with a supporter of the ISO.

In speaking to teachers, Scherrer explained the role of the trade unions, including supposedly “left” factions like the CTU leadership, in enforcing the attack on workers. She noted that unions have agreed to massive cuts in wages and benefits even where corporations are profitable, as in the recent contract pushed through after a strike at a Caterpillar plant in Joliet, Illinois.

“The attack on teachers is an attack on public education.” Scherrer said. “We insist on the right to high quality education for everyone.” One teacher, with 17 years experience and currently coordinating an International Baccalaureate program, said, “Absolutely.” She continued, “With the charter schools, all kinds of different investors are allowed to come in.”

Campaigners discussed the role of the CTU. Last year, the CTU, including President Karen Lewis, backed a bill that expanded the use of standardized tests to fire teachers and gave school districts the ability to add weeks to the school year without compensation.

One teacher defended Lewis, saying, “She didn’t really know what she was doing. Her back was up against the wall... But we have confidence in her, in this leadership. If we didn’t, I don’t know what we’d do.”

SEP supporters responded by explaining that whatever its “left” phrases, the CTU was determined to prevent a genuine struggle in defense of teacher jobs and public education. The SEP calls for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees and a political

offensive of the entire working class against Emanuel and both big business parties.

Scherrer spoke to Nick, an ex-banker, who has been teaching in Chicago schools for two years. “I used to support Obama, but I changed my mind about a year ago. I was a Ron Paul supporter because of his non-interventionist foreign policy. I disagreed with his domestic policies. I just really felt that the money wasted on wars overseas could be better used to help people in this country.”

Scherrer explained the deeply right-wing program of Paul, which includes the dismantling of public education and other social services. It is impossible to oppose war, she said, without opposing the root cause of war—the capitalist system.

Nick added, “I don’t think we should be involved militarily in so many countries. Things are worse now than under Bush. Just one example are the drone strikes being carried by Obama throughout the Middle East. The right-wing media is endorsing it. I predict a boom of the religious right to justify it.

“I am also opposed to the way the financial markets are dominating politics. I got out of banking because I had a conscience and couldn’t do it anymore. I heard about the new policy of bringing jobs back through ‘insourcing’, but at what cost to our wages and living standards?

“I also disagree with Obama’s policies on education,” Nick added. “‘Race to the Top’ is really a ‘race to the bottom’. Just a look at the conditions in schools should be enough. The kids have to come out to eat from vendors after school because the school lunches are atrocious.”

Michael, a public school teacher, voiced his concerns to Scherrer. “Where do you start? Teachers are vocal and caring. However, the media has an agenda against teachers and other workers. Where is the fairness in the reporting? And both parties are corrupt. There is no government ‘of the people, by the people, for the people.’ Our government is one of the haves controlling the have-nots.”

Referring to interest payments on student loans, Michael said, “I don’t understand capitalistic society. How does it benefit anyone to have all of these student loans floating out there? It seems like we have to pay money to borrow money. It is a new type of slavery. I won’t finish paying my loans until retirement, and I

have to hope that I get a pension. How many religions around the world forbid usury? Yet we base our entire economy on it.

“Then there is the banking crisis that is affecting us and the reason they are going after education. In fact, it’s bigger than us; it’s global. I think about WWII and Nazi Germany. Many people were apolitical, and fascism was able to take over.”

In response, Scherrer reviewed the history of the rise of fascism, which grew out of the Great Depression and was made possible thanks to the treachery of the leadership of what were then mass working-class parties—the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party.

Though it took a different form, the basic issue today, Scherrer said, was also the problem of working-class leadership. “For your struggle or that of other workers to be diverted back into support for the Democrats rather than into an independent political struggle—a break from the Democrats and the building of a socialist party that fights in the interest of the international working class—that means certain defeat.”



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