

An exchange on the Chicago Teachers Union

Alexander Fangmann
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The following is a letter sent to the WSWS in response to the article, "Chicago Teachers Union agrees to lengthening of the school day." It is followed by a reply from the author of the article, Alexander Fangmann.

I have been reading your website for the past six months and typically find your coverage on most issues quite good, but this article is a load of garbage. I am not sure if you have any first hand contact with teachers in Chicago, or if this is simply a beef with the ISO, but you are way off. First off, I want you to remember that the CTU voted with 90% of all members to authorize a strike and then unanimously rejected the independent fact finder report through their HOD. The leadership did everything it could to help make sure the strike vote went the way it did and to build up a cause so that no delegate thought about voting yes to the fact finder mission. As for the longer school day, that is something only Rahm can decide and it is a huge victory for elementary school teachers to keep their 5.75 hour workday. Track E schools go back in session in less than two weeks and if no interim agreement was reached, over 25% of CTU members would have had to work a ridiculously long day with wages still undecided. From the activist circles here in Chicago, independent reporting outlets and even some mainstream media has this first battle going to the CTU.

I am not sure what the WSWS has with the leadership of the CTU, but in two years they have turned a complacent union that followed the orders of Mayor Daley to one that is leading class struggle here in Chicago. I really hope you try to do some justice to what the CTU has accomplished the next time you write an article about my hometown and its teachers.

Tony Lawrence

Dear Tony,

You take issue with our article on the deal signed by the Chicago Teachers Union with the school district. You state that this article, in contrast to the many articles on the WSWS, is "garbage." In fact, our analysis of the role of the CTU is based on the same Marxist approach the WSWS takes to all political developments. That is, we begin from the standpoint of the working class and seek to reveal the social and class interests of all those forces that work to smother the independent initiative and political struggle of workers.

The Interim Agreement between the CTU and CPS was, as we reported, a miserable betrayal of teachers, which only paves the way for further assaults on public education by Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Obama administration. It is a cave-in to Emanuel's push for a longer school day, adding 14 minutes per day to the workload of high school teachers with no compensation, as well as additional responsibilities for elementary teachers. The rehiring of some recently fired teachers is no victory at all, as they will lack any job security and be subject to arbitrary dismissal.

You say that the extension of the school day is "something only Rahm (Emanuel) can decide." Why? To say this only further demonstrates the prostration of the CTU and ISO before the Democratic Party and the corporate and financial interests it serves.

This is only the latest betrayal of the CORE (Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators) leadership of the CTU, which on every fundamental issue continues the same right-wing policies of its predecessors. Over the last two years, Karen Lewis, Jesse Sharkey and the rest of the CORE leadership have accepted mass layoffs, school closures, "turnarounds" and the destruction of tenure and other workplace rights.

Behind the backs of the membership in April 2011, the CTU leadership collaborated with the Illinois Democratic state legislature in the passage of the anti-teacher Senate Bill 7, which restricts the right to strike

and expands the use of standardized tests to fire teachers without regard to seniority or tenure.

In your letter you fail to mention that Bill 7, which Lewis and other union officials hailed as “the most significant, bold and comprehensive reforms in education in more than 40 years,” also handed Emanuel and the heads of other school districts unilateral power to add extra hours to the school day and weeks to the school year without compensation.

You write, “In two years the CTU leadership has turned a complacent union that followed the orders of Mayor Daley to one that is leading [the] class struggle here in Chicago.” In fact, as you make clear, it has gone from a union that took orders from Mayor Daley to one that takes orders from Mayor Emanuel.

The fight to defend public education is above all a political fight against the Democratic Party which, no less than the Republicans, is imposing savage austerity measures and destroying public education in order to protect the interests of the financial aristocracy. The defense of public education and every other social and democratic right of the working class is inseparable from a break with this big business party and the fight for socialism. This is the only way to accomplish the redistribution of wealth and reorganization of society needed to improve and expand public education and raise the material and cultural level of society as a whole.

The fight for the political independence of the working class is something that the ISO rejects out of hand as utopian and “sectarian.” They have far more practical work to do in trying to revive the credibility of trade unions that have spent the last three decades betraying the working class, and through the unions to keep the working class subordinated to the Democratic Party.

It is impossible to defend teachers’ conditions and public education if educators are straitjacketed inside of the CTU and other unions. The AFT, NEA and other teachers’ unions are not opposed to school “reform” and the attack on teachers. They only want to be partners in the process in order to defend the institutional interests and dues income of the labor apparatus. That is why the teachers’ unions are going all out again for the reelection of President Obama, even as he spearheads the attack on public education.

There are growing signs of resistance by teachers and

other sections of the working class to the bipartisan attack on social programs and living standards—and a growing hostility to the unions. Organizations like the ISO, which do the bidding of the CTU and other unions, do not speak for the working class but an affluent layer of the upper middle class. No small factor in the ISO’s adoration for CORE is that it has provided career opportunities for various pseudo-left “activists” who function as public relations agents for this rotten organization.

In regards to the deal to lengthen the school day, you write: “From the activist circles here in Chicago, independent reporting outlets and even some mainstream media has this first battle going to the CTU.” That only underscores the fact that the ISO has joined the line-up of forces lying to teachers and preparing the way for even greater betrayals, which they will inevitably hail as victories. This includes the ongoing contract negotiations. Even in the event that the CTU calls a strike, it will do everything it can to impose the demands of Emanuel.

You ask us if we speak to Chicago teachers. We most certainly do, and when we do we tell them the truth. The only way forward is to break with the pro-Democratic Party and pro-capitalist trade unions like the CTU and build new organizations of struggle, controlled by the rank-and-file and based on an entirely new political strategy. Above all this means the development of a mass political party of the working class based on a socialist program.

The fight to build the necessary leadership for this struggle means a determined effort to expose the ISO and other organizations that ultimately function as part of the capitalist political establishment.



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