

SEP candidates discuss fight to defend education with Chicago teachers

Our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party presidential and vice presidential candidates Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer campaigned among striking teachers in Chicago over the weekend. Some 26,000 teachers are continuing their weeklong strike after the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) failed to ram through a contract deal Sunday.

At a rally on Saturday and a meeting of the CTU's House of Delegates on Sunday the SEP candidates expressed their solidarity with the determined stand by the teachers. White and Scherrer explained the necessity for the development of a political struggle by the working class against both parties of big business, which are determined to destroy public education.

Teachers are in a bitter battle with Mayor Rahm Emanuel—President Obama's former chief of staff—who wants to gut job security, shut down more than 100 schools and sharply increase the number of privately run charter schools.

The strike is an explicit challenge to the Obama administration's reactionary agenda of school "reform," punitive "accountability" schemes based on test scores, and privatization. Allied with the Democratic Party, the CTU is opposed to mounting a struggle against the Obama administration, even as it spearheads the attack on public education.

At Saturday's rally, one teacher told White, "Ninety-eight percent of the kids in my school qualify for free lunch because they come from low-income families. More than half are English as a Second Language students. The new teacher evaluation plan demands a four percent increase in student performance every year. We're already beating the odds by helping our students develop. But instead of helping the teachers

they want to throw us out if we don't keep meeting the performance targets."

White explained that Obama was demanding teachers be held accountable for test scores of inner-city youth facing high levels of poverty and homelessness. At the same time, school districts were slashing teacher jobs and funding for school transportation, textbooks and other supplies. "It's a self-fulfilling prophecy," White said. "The poverty and budget cuts ensure that young people cannot do well in school. Then the authorities use tests to fire more experienced teachers who know what is needed to teach children and replace them with low-paid instructors without the slightest job security."

Michael, a delegate, said, "Obama pushes charter schools as if their performance was going through the roof. It's just not true, even though they can select which students can attend. If you transform a school in an upper-middle-class neighborhood into a charter school, the kids will still do well. But it won't happen that way in a poorer neighborhood. The kids will get a miserable education, but the money will be going into the pockets of some private company. The problems in the schools are not the teachers' fault."

Willie, a teacher who retired from the Chicago public schools, said, "There is a deep suspicion among delegates. Many want to reject this contract because it escalates the use of testing and other things to fire teachers. It's all about the money. I retired 13 years ago and in all my years there has never been a genuine effort to educate inner city youth."

Referring to the role of the unions, Willie said, "Our grandfathers built the unions but they were quickly corrupted. Now you have the head of the American Federation of Teachers making six hundred thousand dollars. The union structure is out to get the big money,

not look after ordinary teachers.”

Jim, another veteran teacher, referred to the headline on the leaflet being distributed by the SEP candidates and their supporters. “It’s like you say, this deal is not what we went on strike for. This struggle is bigger than just Chicago. It’s part of a larger fight against the erosion of workers’ rights. There is huge opposition to the attack on public education. The entire nation is watching us here. That is why I don’t want to lose the momentum we have built up. We should expand the strike, not end it.”

Referring to the bipartisan attack on public education, Jim added, “Both parties are for the elites. There is a slight difference in flavors, but this lesser of two evils stuff is bull. I saw through Obama in the last election. It was like mass hypnosis in 2008. But he is a warmonger like Bush. Trillions of dollars have gone to the wars and for Wall Street, not to the schools, the streets or other needs.”

One preschool teacher said, “I don’t know anybody who works three years without a raise.” Referring to the CTU’s capitulation to Emanuel’s demand to lengthen the school day without pay in the August interim agreement, she said, “That’s ludicrous.” Speaking about the stakes in the strike, she said, “We’ll be hired and fired based on a principal’s feelings. All displaced teachers should be rehired. What’s going to happen to the teachers at the schools to be closed?”

“We’re out here for teachers *and* students. Forty to fifty students in a class is an injustice to students too.”

During Saturday’s rally the CTU paraded a series of union officials and Democratic politicians like Jesse Jackson out on the stage. While posturing as friends of the teachers, they are all complicit in the attack on public education. The word “Obama” was not uttered once during the whole event.

Speaking to a group of teachers at the rally, White said that big-business parties and unions around the world insisted that the working class pay for the failure of the capitalist system. When asked for his thoughts, one teacher who was at the rally with his family, said, “There’s a lot at stake. It’s obviously not all about teachers. On so many levels, it’s about people standing up for what they believe in. We want to stand up and want to have the right to do so.”



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