

Teachers strike in Chicago

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Negotiations between the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest school district in the country, and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) broke off Sunday evening. Thousands of workers will man picket lines on Monday morning in the first strike by Chicago teachers in 25 years.

The school board, backed by the administration of Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, has made clear its determination to impose new attacks on the teachers. “This is about as much as we can do,” School Board President David Vitale said early Monday. “There is only so much money in the system.”

CPS has put together a strike-breaking contingency plan, opening 144 schools and 60 churches, many staffed by inexperienced people including lawyers and office staff. CPS CEO Jean-Claude Brizard has asked teachers not to picket those 144 schools.

The strike is an expression of deep-seated anger among the 30,000 Chicago teachers, who have faced decades of cuts in school budgets, wages and benefits. In recent years, Chicago teachers have borne the brunt of the assault on public-sector workers in the city, now headed by Emanuel. Emanuel is the former White House chief of staff of President Obama, who is overseeing the assault on public education at the national level, including the expansion of for-profit charter operations and the mass firing of teachers in schools that are labeled as “failing.”

Among the issues at stake are efforts by Emanuel to tie pay to testing, increase health care costs, and reduce pay for senior teachers. Teachers are demanding improved classroom conditions, including adequate heating and cooling of classrooms.

There is widespread support in the working class of Chicago for the teachers.

While teachers are determined to fight, the CTU—headed by a “left” faction that includes President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization—has made clear that its priority is to reach an agreement with the Emanuel administration and maintain its ties with the Democratic Party. Any such agreement will be based on further attacks on teachers and on public education as a whole.

Sharkey told local media early Sunday that the “the economics of the deal are close” and reiterated at a CTU press conference Sunday night that money is not the primary issue in the negotiations. This suggests that the CTU is prepared to make concessions on wages and benefits.

Sharkey also referred to a major concession made by the CTU in an interim agreement last July in which the union gave up the right to bargain on certain issues. “We’re not allowed to call a strike over this, but [teacher] recall is very important,” he said. “Earlier, teachers agreed to a longer day, and what we got in return was that teachers would be recalled. There’s been no recall for teachers.”

As the negotiations between CPS officials and the CTU progressed, union leaders made clear that they wanted to avoid a strike. Both Vitale and Lewis said on Friday night they had made progress in negotiations.

Lewis said, “No one is victorious in a strike,” and expressed her hope that negotiations would be settled quickly. She told the *Chicago Tribune*, “We know this is an austerity contract. If you don’t have the money,

the question is, “What else can you do?”

Earlier this summer, teachers voted by 90 percent to authorize a strike. Since then, union leaders have repeatedly indicated that they are willing to accept a concessions-laden contract.

This position is bound up with the CTU’s alliance with the Democratic Party and support for the Obama reelection campaign. The union deliberately delayed filing a required 10-day notification of intention to strike to ensure that there was no possibility of any action during the Democratic National Convention last week.

The teachers unions have already declared their support for the reelection of Obama. Speaking at the Democratic National Convention, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, encouraged Chicago schools administrators and the CTU to come to an agreement.

“We need to find common ground,” Weingarten said. “We are Democrats... The teachers of Chicago feel deeply disrespected and deeply disenfranchised and that’s what this struggle is about.” Indicating her support for a concessions deal negotiated with Emanuel, Weingarten added “I know the struggle can be settled and I know we can move forward, but we need to find common ground and as Democrats we have to deal with each other.”

Emanuel resigned this week as co-chairman of Obama's reelection campaign in order to lead an Obama super PAC.

Other unions have already taken steps to isolate the teachers. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1 President Tom Balanoff said at a union press conference Saturday that janitorial workers were contractually obligated to work and would not respect teachers’ picket lines.

Teachers should place no confidence in the CTU leadership, which has in both word and deed signaled its unwillingness to mount a serious fight against

layoffs, school closures and privatizations.

A successful struggle depends upon the mobilization of the entire working class of Chicago against the Emanuel administration and the corporate interests it represents. This means a break with the CTU and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees to organize the strike.

The defense of public education and the interests of teachers is above all a political question. The strike by Chicago teachers takes place under conditions of growing working class struggles throughout the country and internationally. The corporate and financial elite, represented by both big business parties, is determined to make the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism.

Regardless of who wins the upcoming elections, there will be an escalation of the attacks on the basic rights of the working class, including public education. The struggle of Chicago teachers deserves the support of the entire working class. It poses the necessity for the development of an independent political movement of the working class against the twin parties of big business—the Democrats and Republicans—on the basis of socialist policies.



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