

Democrats and Republicans line up against Chicago teachers

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More than 25,000 teachers went on strike Monday morning in Chicago, Illinois, shutting down the nation's third largest school district.

The strike—the first by Chicago teachers in 25 years—is a powerful expression of mass opposition to the attack on teachers and public education by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a Democrat. It is part of a growing spirit of resistance in the working class nationally and internationally. On Monday, thousands of teachers participated in picketing, followed by a mass rally in the evening.

Only one day into the strike, the political issues have emerged with exceptional clarity. In their effort to defend their jobs and the public school system, the Chicago teachers have come into conflict not only with the mayor, but with the Obama administration and both big business parties. (See: “Striking teachers speak out in Chicago”)

Emanuel responded to the strike by denouncing the teachers with typical arrogance, declaring that they are engaged in a “strike of choice” that is “unnecessary.” For Emanuel and the Chicago political establishment, the strike is “unnecessary” because it challenges their demand that teachers accept merit pay and procedures to give school authorities a pretext to fire them, elements of a broader strategy to dismantle public education.

The national political implications of the struggle were made clear by the extraordinary intervention of the Republican Party. In the midst of an election season, in which hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent on mutual mudslinging between the two parties, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney moved quickly to line up behind the Chicago school board and Mayor Emanuel.

Romney denounced the teachers for exercising their right to strike, saying that the strike “was one of the clearest examples” of the way in which “teachers unions have too often made plain that their interests conflict with those of our children.”

Romney's running mate, Paul Ryan, was even more explicit in his support for Emanuel. “Rahm and I have not agreed on every issue or on a lot of issues,” he declared, “but Mayor Emanuel is right today in saying that this teachers' union strike is unnecessary and wrong.” He added that “education reform is a bipartisan issue.”

Whatever their differences, when it comes to their hatred for the working class, the two parties are entirely united. The Republicans are no less aware than the Democrats that a defeat of the Chicago teachers' struggle is essential for carrying out the bipartisan policy of dismantling public education. And after decades in which the class struggle has been artificially suppressed with the help of the trade unions, the ruling elite views any working class resistance as intolerable, if not criminal.

The courageous stand taken by the Chicago teachers is a challenge to Obama's entire education agenda, including the “Race to the Top” program which seeks to expand merit pay and charter schools. When Romney criticized Obama for not being sufficiently forthright in backing Emanuel and the school board, Obama campaign spokesman Ben LaBolt responded by declaring, “President Obama's leadership has led to groundbreaking reforms in our schools.”

Emanuel is not just the mayor of Chicago, he is Obama's right-hand man. There can be no doubt that he

is coordinating his actions closely with the administration. Emanuel served as the president's chief of staff before he left to run for the post of Chicago mayor.

A former investment banker, Emanuel is also a top figure in the Obama reelection campaign, having just stepped down as co-chair of the campaign to head fundraising efforts by Obama's super PAC. The stated aim of the super PAC is to raise \$150 million from multi-millionaire and billionaire donors.

The political connections between Obama and the Chicago establishment are innumerable. Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, is the former CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), where he initiated many of the anti-teacher policies now being expanded by Emanuel. Duncan headed the CPS under Mayor Richard Daley, the brother of William Daley, who replaced Emanuel as Obama's chief of staff in 2011.

Emanuel has plans to shut down dozens of public schools and lay off thousands of teachers. At the same time, the city hopes to open 60 new charter schools in addition to the 100 that are currently operating. Many of the charter schools are owned and operated by Noble Charter Network, which has close ties to billionaire Hyatt Hotel heiress Penny Pritzker, a longtime supporter of Obama.

The teachers' determination to fight stands in sharp contrast to the position of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) leadership, which is scrambling to reach an agreement with Emanuel and the CPS. Negotiations resumed on Monday, but CTU leaders made no public statements.

The principal concern of the CTU—led by the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) leadership of President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization—is to maintain its political alliance with the Democratic Party.

Over the last two years, the CTU has accepted mass layoffs, school closures, "turnarounds" and the dismantling of tenure and other workplace rights. In April of 2011, behind the backs of the membership, the CTU collaborated with the Illinois Democratic-controlled 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. Earlier this year, the CTU accepted the lengthening of the school day as part of an interim agreement.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, the parent organization of the CTU, expressed her political solidarity with Emanuel over the weekend. She said that when he was elected, Emanuel "wanted to make major changes in Chicago Public Schools... Some changes we didn't agree with, some we agreed with. But changes of that kind of magnitude need to be done collaboratively and correctly, not just quickly."

This is a transparent signal that the union officials are not opposed to further attacks on the teachers. They are ready to collaborate with the politicians and school authorities, asking only to be included in the decision-making process.

At the Democratic National Convention last week, Weingarten urged the CTU and Emanuel to come to a settlement, declaring that "we are all Democrats."

Victory in the strike depends above all on an understanding of the political dimensions of the struggle and the need to win the active support of workers throughout Illinois and across the country. Teachers must resolutely oppose any attempt to subordinate the defense of public education to the political alliance of the trade unions with the Democratic Party.



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