

Mayor Emanuel plans to close one-fifth of Chicago public schools

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A central issue in the struggle of Chicago teachers is the plan by the city, backed by the Obama administration, to dismantle large sections of the school district, closing dozens of public schools and opening new privately-operated charter schools.

On Wednesday, the *Chicago Tribune* reported on the plans of Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel to close between 80 and 120 public schools, mainly in the most impoverished working class parts of the city, including Bronzeville, North Lawndale, Garfield Park and Englewood. This would involve laying off thousands of teachers.

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest school district in the country, currently manages 600 schools. Thus the city aims to eliminate up to one fifth of the public schools.

At the same time, the *Tribune* reports, “In a proposal to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, CPS officials have laid out a plan to create 60 more charter schools over five years.” This would bring the total number of charter schools up to 160 and the total number of public schools down to 480.

These plans explode the hypocrisy of the Emanuel administration’s repeated claims that the teachers’ strike is “harming children.” The city, having starved the schools of funding for decades, is seeking to privatize education. This will leave students at the mercy of a corrupt layer of businessmen, with the public schools facing ever worsening conditions of overcrowding and decay.

The mayor’s office has declined to release specifics

of its plans, and the *Tribune* reported that a “targeted outreach program” would be launched “as soon as a teachers contract is settled.” In other words, the city wants to keep its plans secret, from the public and the teachers, while it works out an agreement with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

For its part, the CTU has made clear its willingness to go along with the school shutdown plans, only asking that the administration collaborate with the union to ensure that the attack on public schools is pursued in a “reasonable way.”

CTU President Karen Lewis said on Wednesday, “We understand the whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively.” She then declared, “We either do this together in some reasonable way or we will always be fighting, and I think the key is that the people that are making these decisions want to make them unilaterally.”

Lewis added, “[I]nstead of sitting in air conditioned buildings with your spreadsheets, come talk to us and look and see what’s really going on.”

Among the major issues reportedly still in dispute in the discussions between the CTU and the city is the issue of teacher recall—i.e., procedures for rehiring a portion of the teachers who have been laid off as a result of school closings, consolidations or “turnarounds.” The latter term refers to the firing of teachers and staff at schools that are declared to be “failing.”

Teachers are demanding that laid off teachers be given priority when new positions open up. But the

Emanuel administration insisted Tuesday that principals be given complete power in determining who is hired at the schools they run. Emanuel wants to push out more experienced, higher paid teachers and give the school district a means of retaliating against teachers who oppose the fraudulent education “reform” measures. Such a policy would all but end tenure for public school teachers.

In July, the CPS reached an “interim agreement” with the CTU that included major concessions by the union, particularly the lengthening of the school day, without increased compensation. The agreement was hailed by supporters of the union bureaucracy—including the International Socialist Organization, whose member is the vice president of the CTU—as a great victory because it provided for the recall of 477 teachers.

In fact, the agreement covered only a small portion of the teachers laid off over the past three years. Moreover, any teachers who are rehired are to be employed only on an “interim” basis, subject to being laid off by the principal after one semester. Now Emanuel and CPS are seeking to halt even this procedure.

The effort to drive out teachers and shut down public schools is also behind the push to tie teacher evaluations, pay and jobs to standardized testing. Teachers in poorer school districts—suffering from a lack of funds as well as the social evils of mass poverty and unemployment—will be targeted, based on low student test scores, to be laid off and their schools singled out for closure.

On Tuesday, a CTU spokesman said the union had already agreed to a formula that ties 25 percent of teacher evaluations to “student growth,” including testing, while indicating the union’s willingness to negotiate with the Emanuel administration to increase this figure.

The CTU’s repeated accommodations to the assault on public education by the Emanuel administration are bound up with its political alliance with the Democratic Party and, through it, support for the capitalist system.

At the rallies organized by the union, virtually nothing is said of a political nature, and members are left in the dark as to the progress of negotiations. When the union officials say anything, it is to criticize Emanuel while seeking to obscure the fact that the mayor is carrying out a policy that is supported by the Obama administration and the entire political establishment. Both the American Federation of Teachers—the CTU’s parent organization—and the rival National Education Association have enthusiastically endorsed Obama’s reelection campaign.

Since coming to office, Obama has relentlessly promoted charter schools, merit pay and the mass firing of teachers at “failing schools.” As school districts throughout the country have been starved of money, the federal government has tied its meager rationing of funds to reactionary “reform” measures such as the Race to the Top program.

What is at issue in the Chicago teachers’ strike is the future of public education itself. The ruling class, with the support of both big business parties, is seeking to utilize the economic crisis to undermine an institution whose origins go back to the American Revolution.



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