

Delegates meeting votes to end Chicago teachers strike

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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) succeeded in obtaining a vote by 800 delegates who met Tuesday evening to end a nine-day strike against the third largest school system in the US. The vote means teachers will return to work on Wednesday, though it will be some three weeks before they are able to vote on the agreement reached between the CTU and Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

There is broad opposition among teachers to the contract deal, which incorporates all of the basic demands of Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel and CPS. In collaboration with the CTU, the city administration and the media have waged a campaign of lies and intimidation aimed at pressuring the teachers to end the strike.

Tuesday's vote was held under the threat of a court injunction, requested by Emanuel Monday morning, that would declare the strike illegal and set the stage for teachers to be fined and arrested.

From day one, the strike came under vicious attack by both big-business parties and all wings of the corporate-controlled media, "liberal" as well as conservative. The political lineup revealed the stark class divisions not only in Chicago, but nationally, and raised the need for the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

The contract expands test-based evaluations used to victimize and fire teachers, undermines recall rights for laid-off teachers, grants principals far greater control over hiring and firing, and includes other concessions. These measures will facilitate the planned shutdown of up to 120 Chicago public schools, the mass firing of teachers, and the expansion of for-profit charter schools.

Emanuel immediately hailed Tuesday's decision and praised the union for negotiating an agreement that advances his school "reform" agenda. "It means a new day and a new direction for the Chicago Public Schools," he said. "In this contract we gave our children a seat at the

table. In past negotiations taxpayers paid more but our children got less. This time our taxpayers are paying less and our kids are getting more."

The reality behind Emanuel's rhetoric about "giving kids more" is the shredding of teachers' rights, the dismantling of public schools and the subordination of education to corporate profiteering.

From the beginning, the CTU leadership of President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey accepted the entire framework of the attack on teachers and on public education, including the claim from CPS that there is no money and massive cuts are necessary.

The union's position was bound up with its political alliance with the Democratic Party, which is spearheading the assault on public education in Chicago and nationally. Throughout the strike, the CTU sought to obscure the fact that what is happening in Chicago is part of a nationwide campaign led by the Obama administration to dismantle public education in the United States.

The union leadership called the strike to let off steam and create the conditions for pushing through the city's basic demands. As soon as the walkout began, the union came under intense pressure from the Democratic Party establishment to end it. Lewis announced as early as last Thursday that the city and the CTU had a "framework" for an agreement. However, the union refrained from providing any details as it sought to package the concessions contract as a victory for the teachers.

On Friday, the CTU leadership decided not to hold a delegates' vote on ending the strike, sensing it could not get a back-to-work resolution passed. On Sunday, the day initial details were released, the House of Delegates voted to continue the strike for at least two more days, rejecting efforts to end the strike before the delegates, let alone the broader membership, had even seen the contract.

Lewis spent Monday and Tuesday telling teachers that the CTU negotiators would not fight for a better contract,

whatever the Tuesday delegates meeting decided. In a radio interview with WBEZ Tuesday morning, Lewis said that it was “not about rebargaining at this point.” She continued, “People will never get exactly what they want in a contract,” and added, “This is an austerity contract.”

The union sought to conceal the actual content of the agreement, sugar-coating the capitulation with talk of “victories.” It trumpeted the fact, for example, that the final agreement did not include a specific merit pay proposal. That proposal, in fact, had been dropped by the city before the strike began.

Aware of widespread skepticism and opposition to the contract as outlined by the union among rank-and-file teachers, Lewis and Sharkey told delegates that a vote to return to work did not mean an end to the struggle, and that the contract could still be rejected. They also pointed to what they claimed to be even more rotten agreements made by unions in other districts.

The impact of the coordinated campaign to end the strike carried out by the city and the union was reflected in the response of delegates, including one who told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We were told by the union to weigh the gains and the losses. Among the membership we discussed that this wasn’t the best contract, but this was the best we could get now. We intend to keep fighting school closings and conditions in schools.”

In fact, the suppression of the strike by the CTU hands Emanuel a major victory, giving the administration the initiative to pursue the victimization of teachers and the gutting of public education in Chicago.

The corporate and political establishment in Chicago, along with the Obama White House, was relying heavily on Lewis and company to betray the teachers’ struggle. The ruling class as a whole was frightened by the failure of the CTU to get a back-to-work vote at Sunday’s delegates’ meeting, and various commentators spoke openly of the danger of the struggle spinning out of the control of the union. The lead article of Monday’s *Chicago Tribune* complained of the inability of the union to contain the “vitriol” of its members.

At a press conference following the delegates meeting Tuesday evening, a reporter for the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that a central concern of teachers was the city’s plans for shutting dozens of schools. He asked why teachers should give credence to the CTU’s claims to be opposed to school privatization when it was so determined to push through what Lewis herself called an “austerity” contract.

Lewis replied by declaring, “We can’t get a perfect

contract... The issue is, do we stay on strike forever until every little thing we want can be gotten?”

Among the membership there was broad support for continuing the strike, though the government and union campaign to end the walkout had an impact on sections of teachers. The delegates who voted to end the strike are, in any event, more conservative and in general closer to the union bureaucracy than the membership as a whole.

On Tuesday morning, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party visited a picket at Hayt Elementary on the city’s Far North Side and spoke to teachers about the significance of the strike and the widespread support for it in the working class. In preparation for a consultative vote, a CTU delegate told teachers that if they agreed with 75 percent of the contract they should support an end to the strike. The teachers nevertheless voted by a large majority to continue the strike.

The CTU had prepared a leaflet to be handed out by teachers that referred to the strike in the past tense. Several teachers refused to hand it out. They expressed concern that the leadership was abandoning the strike.

The union and the Emanuel administration have succeeded in getting teachers back to work, but that does not reflect a lack of determination on the part of teachers to fight. As the assault on public education continues, struggles by teachers will erupt in new forms. Through its conduct of the strike, the CTU leadership has succeeded only in demonstrating the bankruptcy of its entire perspective.



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