

End of Chicago strike paves way for redoubled attack on teachers, public education

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20 September 2012

Chicago teachers returned to work on Wednesday, one day after the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) succeeded in passing a motion to end the strike at a House of Delegates meeting. The political and media establishment is wasting no time in seizing the initiative and pressing forward in the attack on teachers and public education.

The full contract has not been released and language is still being worked out. No teachers have yet seen the entire tentative agreement, which they will be able to vote on only in three to four weeks. Many questions still remain, but it is clear that the agreement concedes to the school board all the essential demands of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

After running into stiff opposition from teachers—reflected in a delegates meeting on Sunday that refused to call off the strike—CTU officials, including President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey, pushed through a vote to end the strike by claiming that the contract is a significant victory for teachers. They have pointed, for example, to the fact that the contract does not contain a merit pay proposal—an issue that was not a significant point at issue in the negotiations.

Documents released by the union so far include a partial tentative agreement and highlights distributed to the delegates. Among the principal provisions are:

* The establishment for the first time of a test-based teacher evaluation system that can be used to quickly dismiss teachers—including, after one year, tenured teachers. The agreement codifies in contract form a state law passed in 2011, with the support of the CTU and other unions, providing for 25 to 30 percent of evaluations to be based on testing, which could rise to

35 percent in the fourth year of the contract.

The contract gives significant room for maneuver to increase testing, establishing a joint Chicago Public Schools-CTU committee to make changes to the evaluation system without any required agreement of the teachers.

All teachers will be subject to punitive review procedures if their evaluations are deemed insufficient. Those categorized in the lowest level (“unsatisfactory”) can be fired in 90 days. If a teacher is in the second-to-lowest category (“developing”) for two years in a row, without increasing his or her score, he or she will be moved to “unsatisfactory.”

The union has hailed the creation of a new “appeals” process, but there is no genuine basis for challenging ratings. The appeals board will consist of four individuals, one selected by the board, one by the union president, and two agreed on jointly—essentially making the union a partner in the firing and victimization of teachers.

Scores that are derived from testing can be appealed “only if the teacher identifies a data integrity or data analysis error” as the cause of low test scores, ie., not factors such as poverty, understaffing and large class sizes. The appeals board can change an evaluation only if three members conclude that the rating is “clearly erroneous.” This puts the burden of proof on the teacher.

* The granting to principals of broad authority to hire any teachers they choose, without regard to seniority. This will allow Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to push out more experienced and higher-paid teachers, as well as those who are more resistant to education “reform.” The layoff/recall section is not included in the partial

detailed contract language released by the union, but the highlights make clear that the union has agreed to a layoff procedure that prioritizes ratings over seniority.

The CTU has pointed to the creation of a “hiring list” from which new teachers must be selected, declaring that at least half of all members must be laid off teachers. This they have said amounts to “job security.” In fact, the language in this section is very vague, stating only that CPS must aim to fill 50 percent of new positions with displaced teachers or face unspecified penalties. Moreover, only teachers who are in the top two evaluation levels will be eligible for the pool.

Teachers who have been laid off will see the time they receive full pay and benefits cut in half, to five months. CPS insisted on this provision in anticipation of laying off thousands of teachers.

* The establishment of a longer school day and year without additional compensation for teachers. This was already included in an “interim agreement” that the union signed in July. The length of the school day is increased from 5 hours and 45 minutes to 7 hours for elementary school students and from 7 hours to 7 hours 30 minutes for high school students. The year is increased from 170 to 180 days. The increased work hours more than cancel out limited pay increases.

* A freeze on health care contributions from teachers is coupled with mandatory participation in a punitive “wellness program” for all teachers and spouses covered by the district’s health care plan. Anyone failing to participate in the plan will be subject to a \$600 fee.

As details emerge, the scale of the concessions becomes clearer. This is one of the reasons why the CTU was so determined to end the strike as quickly as possible. It hopes that even though there will inevitably be mass opposition among teachers, a resumption of the strike will be exceedingly difficult if not impossible in the middle of the school year.

The Emanuel administration and the ruling class in Chicago were taken aback by the extent and determination of the opposition among teachers to their plans. Now that the strike has been concluded with the assistance of the CTU, they will go on the offensive.

The tone was set by the *Chicago Tribune*, which gloated in its lead editorial on Wednesday, “We’ll save you the trouble of wading through this massive contract, 10 months in the haggling. Bottom line: This

is *not* a status-quo-hugging contract. On balance, the deal should bring Chicago closer to other big cities and states that are pushing even more dramatic reforms.”

“The [school] system needs to operate on a much smaller footprint,” the *Tribune* declared in its editorial. “The toughest work of all—closing and consolidating scores of underenrolled and underperforming schools—must start now.” The city has plans to shut down up to one fifth of the public schools, particularly those in poorer and more working class neighborhoods. Class sizes will soar and conditions deteriorate in public schools, which will be used as a justification for opening up for-profit charter schools.

Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, like Emanuel a Democrat, praised what he called a “historic” agreement that “mayors across the nation will be following.” Under the leadership of Nutter, Philadelphia has announced plans to close 64 schools over the next five years, in preparation for eventually turning the entire district over to for-profit charter companies.

In addition to school privatization, the city is planning a wholesale attack on teacher pensions, on the grounds that the pension system has been under-funded for years. Emanuel will proceed now with plans to cut benefits for teachers, while other city and state workers will face the same demands.

In an article entitled, “Next School Crisis for Chicago: Pension Fund is Running Dry,” which was published the day after the strike ended, the *New York Times* wrote that while this issue was “not front and center in the strike...Mr. Emanuel has made it clear that he wants to address teachers’ pensions too.” The mayor says the “system is broken and he is not willing to make increased contributions until it has been fixed.” The mayor has already moved to raise the retirement age for city workers and increase their contributions to retiree benefits.



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