

Lessons of the Chicago teachers strike

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Chicago teachers returned to work on Wednesday after the House of Delegates voted to end their strike. For nine days, the 26,000 teachers waged a courageous struggle in defense of public education. The fight pitted teachers not only against Mayor Rahm Emanuel, but the Obama administration, both big business parties and, most importantly, the Chicago Teachers Union itself.

The contract on the basis of which the strike was concluded is an unambiguous victory for Emanuel. It incorporates the mayor's most essential demands—including the expansion of test-based evaluation systems, the extension of the school day without compensation, and the granting of broad authority to principals to hire and fire teachers.

While the strike has ended, the issues that gave rise to it remain, as does the immense opposition of teachers to the corporate-driven attack on public education. The media, Emanuel and other pro-“reform” mayors are already crowing, licking their chops at the prospect of dismantling teacher pensions, closing hundreds of public schools, and handing over the education system to private corporations.

New struggles will emerge over the fate of public education—in Chicago, where the contract must still be voted on by teachers, and throughout the country. This makes all the more necessary a careful evaluation of the experiences of the strike and its political lessons.

First, it is critical to see the strike within the context of the growth of the class struggle in the US and internationally. Four years after the onset of the global economic crisis, a mood of social opposition is growing—from mass demonstrations in Greece to the strike wave of South African miners.

After funneling trillions to the rich in bank bailouts and other handouts, the corporate and political establishment is demanding a “new normal” of austerity, poverty and wage cuts. Every right that workers have won in struggle is targeted. The financial aristocracy is seeking to turn the clock backwards generations, even centuries. In the case of public education, the American ruling class has a strategy of undermining an institution with roots in the American Revolution itself.

In Chicago, the bipartisan character of this assault was out in the open. Whatever the posturing of Democrats as “socially progressive,” their true character was exposed, as a party no less ruthless than the Republicans and dedicated to the same end was exposed.

In an election season when Americans are supposedly presented with a choice between alternative “visions,” both parties lined up to proclaim their opposition to the teachers. Romney's vice presidential candidate, Paul Ryan, immediately expressed his

solidarity with Emanuel, saying, “school reform is a bipartisan issue.” And indeed it is.

Emanuel is carrying out in Chicago the Obama administration's policy on a national level. Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, is implementing the policies he championed as Chicago Public Schools “CEO” from 2001 to 2009. This includes test-based evaluations to close “failing” schools, firing teachers and staff, and sell off schools to private operators. These reactionary measures are key to Obama's Race to the Top scheme.

The strike gave expression to a deep hostility to this entire agenda. Teachers are motivated to enter their profession by a commitment to the fundamental democratic principle that everyone should have the right to learn.

In their daily life, teachers confront the immense problems of poverty and inequality. They know that the agenda of privatization has nothing to do with improving education. The strike was about not just the interests of teachers, but the defense of public education as a whole—and therefore it involved the interests of the entire working class. With sickening hypocrisy, the media and politicians, both conservative and liberal, denounced the strike for harming children.

The greatest obstacle to carrying out a determined struggle was, and is, the organization that claimed to represent the interests of teachers, the CTU. The logic of the teachers' struggle poses the necessity for a broader mobilization of the entire working class in a political struggle against the representatives of the corporate and financial elite—and the social system, capitalism, they defend.

Yet from the beginning, the CTU was preoccupied with preventing this at all costs. Its primary function was to contain the anger of teachers and prevent it from developing into a political struggle against the Obama administration and the Democratic Party. The role of the union was all the more significant, and revealing, in that it is led by a nominally “left” and opposition faction, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE).

CORE was elected in 2010, after a decade of open collaboration with Duncan had deeply discredited the old leadership. Karen Lewis took over the presidency, backed by the International Socialist Organization, whose member Jesse Sharkey became vice president. CORE presented itself as a more militant leadership dedicated to “social justice unionism” and a fight against school privatization.

In fact, CORE had no significant political differences with the faction it deposed. The new leadership endorsed Pat Quinn for governor, accepted mass layoffs and firings, and worked with Democratic legislators to draft Senate Bill 7, which severely limited teachers' right to strike, allowed for a longer school day

and year without compensation, and expanded the use of standardized tests to fire teachers.

The timing of the strike revealed the CTU's political commitments, as its beginning was deliberately delayed until after the Democratic Party convention that renominated Obama—a convention where American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten got up to insist, in relation to the Chicago contract dispute, that “we are all Democrats.”

Facing the angry opposition of teachers to Obama's reactionary “school reform” agenda, the CTU launched the strike on September 10, largely to let off steam, while behind the scenes it worked out a deal that contained all of Mayor Emanuel's demands.

Throughout the nine-day strike, the CTU did everything to downplay the political issues at stake. At a September 10 rally of thousands of teachers, the word “Obama” was never mentioned by the assorted speakers, which included Jesse Jackson and other Democratic Party politicians, as well as officials from the AFT.

Meanwhile, according to a union source cited by the NBC-TV affiliate in Chicago, the AFT “leaned on the CTU” to settle the contract,” concerned that the strike “could backfire” and negatively impact the Obama administration.

After only a few days on strike, Lewis, who had previously announced that the sides were far apart, reported that the union had reached a “framework” for a deal to end the walkout. Keeping the membership in the dark as much and for as long as possible, the CTU sought to stampede representatives in the House of Delegates to rubber-stamp the agreement.

The effort to ram through the sellout, however, encountered a hurdle when delegates overwhelmingly voted on September 16 to continue the strike. Having been rebuffed, the CTU leadership went into high gear to pressure delegates to end the strike at the next meeting on September 18. The *Chicago Tribune*, a vicious enemy of the teachers, made it clear that Lewis and Sharkey's task was “curbing the vitriol enough to seal a deal.”

Through a combination of intimidation—aided by Mayor Emanuel's move to obtain a court injunction—and outright lies, the CTU pushed through a return-to-work vote. While admitting the union had agreed to an “austerity contract,” Lewis said the CTU would not negotiate anything better because of “tough economic times.” She pointed to state law barring strikes over class sizes and school closings—failing to mention that the CTU had endorsed the very bill that stripped teachers of the right to strike over these issues.

The most cynical role was played by the ISO. At the September 18 delegates meeting, the ISO passed out a leaflet claiming the deal had “turned back the harshest items on the school reform list.” Unable to conceal that it “contains painful concessions,” the ISO justified the sellout by pointing to even more egregious concessions accepted by teacher unions in Detroit, Cleveland and Philadelphia.

The leaflet reiterated Lewis' line that teachers were barred by law from striking over the most critical issues, adding, however, “But it's also important to remember that struggles like these won't end when the strike is over and the contract is signed.”

Thus, the ISO would have teachers believe the CTU, which

sabotaged the strike, demobilized teachers and imposed Emanuel's dictates would now be ready to lead a struggle over school closings!

The Chicago strike revealed the utter worthlessness of the old trade union organizations. It also exposed the class character of the ISO, which upholds the authority of these essentially anti-labor organizations over the working class, and through them the Democratic Party.

An organization defines its class character not by what it calls itself but by its actions. Whatever socialist rhetoric it occasionally employs, in reality the ISO functions as the “left” flank of the capitalist political establishment. Increasingly finding lucrative careers in the trade union apparatus, pseudo-left groups like the ISO represent the interests of an upper-middle class stratum thoroughly hostile to the working class.

The outcome of this struggle was not preordained. The potential existed, and was fought for by the Socialist Equality Party, to transform the strike into a powerful political movement of the working class to defend and vastly improve public education. The SEP fought for teachers to reject the entire framework being imposed on them: above all that the working class must restrict itself to what the Democrats and Republicans say is affordable.

The defense of public education and every other basic social right requires a direct attack on the economic and political dictatorship of the banks and big business and a vast redistribution of wealth from the financial oligarchy to the needs of working people. To fight for this, the working class must free itself from the political domination of the Democrats, who defend the interests of the super-rich just as viciously as their Republican counterparts.

None of the issues that teachers have fought for have been resolved. The next period will see the emergence of even more powerful class struggles. New organizations of struggle are required. Above all, the working class needs a new leadership that fights for its political independence from the two capitalist parties and in doing so fights for socialism. The SEP calls on all teachers ready to take up this struggle to contact us here.



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