

Victory to the Chicago teachers!

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The strike launched by 26,000 Chicago public school teachers is of vital importance to the working class throughout the United States and internationally. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party stand shoulder to shoulder with the striking teachers and call on workers and young people across the country and around the world to support their fight.

The Chicago teachers have courageously defied the gang-up of both corporate-controlled parties—the Democrats and Republicans—together with the media and the financial elite. They are fighting not just for their own jobs, living standards and working conditions, important as that is. They are fighting for principles: the defense of public schools and the right of young people to a decent education.

This strike is the first major confrontation between the American working class and the Obama administration, which is directly coordinating its intervention with Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former White House chief of staff, through Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, former head of the Chicago Public Schools.

According to a *Washington Post* report Wednesday, “administration officials are following the events closely and pushing hard for a speedy resolution. Duncan, a former chief executive of the Chicago school system, has been in frequent phone contact with American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten... And AFT officials reached out to Obama's reelection campaign Sunday to keep the president's team abreast as it became clear that the strike would happen, according to people familiar with the call.”

The corporate-controlled America media portrays the teachers as opponents of “reforms” needed to improve the public schools and depicts the multi-millionaire Mayor Emanuel as the advocate of the children and their parents.

Typical is the editorial in Wednesday's *New York Times*, the newspaper that regularly voices the political sentiments of the Obama administration. The editorial carries the

slandorous headline “Chicago Teachers' Folly.” It calls the strike “senseless,” while denouncing the teachers' opposition to job evaluations based on standardized testing of students and their resistance to hiring without regard to seniority.

In reality, it is big business politicians like Emanuel and his counterparts at the state and federal level, Democratic and Republican, who have waged war against the public schools, particularly over the past three years. Since Obama, a product of the Chicago Democratic machine, entered the White House, more than 300,000 jobs have been slashed in education. His education secretary has spearheaded the attack with programs like Race to the Top, which encourages state and local governments to destroy jobs, slash pay and benefits, and privatize schools.

What the Democrats and Republicans falsely call “reform” is actually the dismantling of public education, one of the great social conquests of the working class, won in bitter struggles over the course of more than a century.

The representatives of big business claim that the jobs and salaries of teachers should be determined by standardized test scores that ignore the impact of horrific social conditions—poverty, homelessness, hunger, drug use, violence—that are the product of the crisis of the capitalist system.

Teachers are well aware of the impact of these conditions on the ability of the children in their classrooms to thrive and learn. They do their best to help children overcome these conditions, but they rightly object to being made the scapegoats for a broader social crisis they did not cause.

The corporate elite is seizing on the crisis to transform public education, like every area of social life, into a source of profit. Hence the drive to privatize the schools and place children at the mercy of for-profit charter school operators and their financial backers, from hedge funds to billionaires like Bill Gates and Eli Broad.

A question should be posed to those who claim that teachers must be “held accountable” for how students perform in standardized tests: why is this demanded of American workers and not of those who actually run the capitalist system?

President Obama declares that he cannot be held accountable for mass unemployment and growing poverty in America because he inherited the financial crisis from the Bush administration. Not a single banker, hedge fund operator or financial speculator has been held accountable for the criminal financial deals that produced the Wall Street crash. No BP executive was held accountable for the Gulf oil spill, nor has any politician been held accountable for such crimes as the war in Iraq, the use of torture by the CIA, or the attacks on constitutional rights under both the Bush and Obama administrations.

But when teachers go on strike in Chicago, the entire US political establishment denounces them with one voice, reacting like slave masters to a long-feared rebellion from below. Republican vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan made the extraordinary declaration that despite his political differences with Rahm Emanuel—co-chair of Obama’s reelection committee until he stepped down to head Obama’s main super PAC—he was in complete solidarity with the Chicago mayor against the striking teachers.

The teachers have provoked the hatred and opposition of the entire political establishment because their struggle challenges the media fantasy of an upside-down world in which multi-millionaires care about the education of poor and minority kids, while school teachers—who have devoted their working lives to helping children learn—are greedy and selfish.

Behind the arrogance and contempt of Rahm Emanuel is not just an abusive personality, but the real fear, on the part of the powers that be, that the Chicago teachers strike is giving voice to a growing mood of resistance throughout the American working class. This was first expressed in a mass form last year in Wisconsin, in the wave of strikes and protests against the anti-worker legislation pushed through by Republican Governor Scott Walker.

The Wisconsin struggle was sabotaged and ultimately defeated by the policies of the union leaders, who blocked a movement toward a general strike and subordinated the workers to the Democratic Party. The lesson for the Chicago teachers is clear: it is impossible to conduct their struggle

successfully without a new political strategy.

Teachers and their supporters must recognize that they face a political struggle not just against Rahm Emanuel, but against the Obama administration and the entire US political establishment, Democrat and Republican. Victory for the teachers requires the broadest mobilization of working people in Chicago and nationally and a direct challenge to the stranglehold of the financial elite on the resources of the country.

Under conditions where the strike unavoidably creates practical problems for working people, there is a danger that the initial broad support for the strike can be eroded under the impact of relentless media and political attacks, unless a wider appeal is made to the working class and the fundamental class and political issues are spelled out.

The official unions, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), reject such a struggle. The union leaders pretend that teachers’ rights and public education can be defended at the same time that the teachers and working people in general are subordinated to the Democratic Party and the capitalist system which it upholds. This is a completely unviable perspective that, if not opposed by the teachers themselves, will lead the struggle to defeat.

The attack on teachers and public education is part of a social counterrevolution being waged by the US ruling elite against the working class as a whole. The fight against it requires the development of an independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist program.

As a first step in this struggle, the Socialist Equality Party proposes the organization of rank-and-file committees of teachers, parents, students and other school workers to take charge of the conduct of the strike and the negotiations with the school system. These committees should provide a base of action for a turn outward to every section of workers and youth in Chicago, in the city’s suburbs, and throughout the country.

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