

Seven Days in Chicago: What has been revealed by the Chicago teachers strike

Jerry White
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The Chicago teachers' strike, which entered its second week on Monday, has laid bare the social and political dynamic of the United States.

Since their strike began one week ago, teachers have faced the ferocious hostility of the entire political and media establishment, which has treated their efforts to defend public education as if the strikers were their slaves. As the *Chicago Tribune* put it, the teachers were seeking to oppose the "arc of history," by which they meant the efforts of the ruling class to rip up every social gain made by working people over generations of struggle.

Having slashed funding for public education for decades and pursued policies resulting in a vast increase in poverty, the Democrats and Republicans are united in scapegoating teachers and using test scores to fire them and accelerate the process of privatizing education.

The strike in Chicago is a test case in the reactionary school "reform" agenda of the Obama administration. It is no accident it is taking place in Chicago—the home of the Democratic Party machine that propelled Obama into the White House—and that teachers are pitted against Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff and the current head of fundraising for the president's reelection campaign.

On Sunday, a meeting of teachers' delegates rejected the attempt of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) to end the strike on terms that accept all of the demands of Mayor Emanuel. The teachers refused to be stampeded into accepting a sellout.

Mayor Emanuel, who pocketed earnings of *\$16 million as an investment banker in two-and-a-half years* after his 1998 departure from the Clinton White House, is outraged that the delegates insisted that they

and the membership at least be allowed to know the exact terms of the settlement before calling off the struggle.

Emanuel's response is to seek a court injunction to force teachers back to the work, arguing the strike is "illegal" and that it is "a clear and present danger to public health and safety." This is coming from a mayor who is seeking to dismantle public education in Chicago and confine the vast majority of children to a future of poverty, overcrowded classrooms in deteriorating schools, and unemployment.

A court has delayed a hearing until Wednesday. If teachers do not capitulate Tuesday and vote the "right" way at the next House of Delegates meeting, the injunction is set to go forward with the threat of massive fines, firings and arrests.

This recalls more than Reagan's firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers. The ruling class in Chicago has a long history of responding to the class struggle with an iron fist. This is a city where four leaders of the eight-hour day movement—the Haymarket martyrs—were sent to the gallows in 1887, a dozen striking steelworkers were gunned down in 1937, and two young Black Panther civil rights leaders—Fred Hampton and Mark Clark—were murdered by Chicago police in cold blood in 1969.

As for the CTU, it has revealed itself to be absolutely unwilling and incapable of leading a struggle to defend the teachers. The CTU bureaucracy, led by Karen Lewis and Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), never intended to wage a serious struggle. The CTU called the strike merely as a means of letting off steam. The intention from the start has been to accept terms worked out behind closed doors with the mayor.

Caught off guard by the opposition of teachers—who

reportedly shouted at the CTU leaders to “get it right”—Lewis sought to justify the betrayal by insisting that the contract, though not “good,” was “the deal we got.” In reality, it was the deal she and Sharkey accepted in lieu of conducting a struggle against the Democratic Party, the Rahm Emanuel administration in Chicago, and the Obama administration in Washington.

Regardless of the opposition of the teachers, the CTU is determined to push through a sellout. Lewis and Sharkey welcome Emanuel’s threat to obtain an injunction. They hope that this will convince teachers that further resistance is futile.

The policy of the CTU is determined not by teachers, but by the bureaucracy’s political alliance with the Democratic Party and its acceptance of and support for the existing capitalist set-up. Lewis has said that what teachers can achieve is restricted by the school district’s budget deficit. Moreover, the CTU has accepted city plans to close more than 100 schools and add 60 more charters, saying only that it wants this to be done with the collaboration of the union, rather than unilaterally.

The course of the strike has laid bare not only the relationship of classes, but also the mechanisms of class rule. The ruling class maintains an elaborate network of political institutions and organizations to preserve its control over the working class and regulate and suppress social opposition.

The trade union apparatus plays the principal role in this suppression. Behind the unions stand various pseudo-left groups like the ISO. Whatever “left” and even “socialistic” rhetoric they employ, the ISO and similar organizations speak for a layer of the upper-middle class that is deeply hostile to any independent political struggle of the working class. They are desperate to maintain the authority of the unions over the working class, and through it the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party.

The Chicago teachers’ struggle is a decisive battle to defend public education. This struggle can be won, but only if teachers make a direct appeal to the working class as a whole. There is enormous support for teachers among workers, parents and young people throughout Chicago and across the country. This potential can be mobilized only if the class issues are explained and a fight organized on the basis of a struggle against the Democratic Party and the profit

system it defends.

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