

The two paths open to Chicago teachers

Socialist Equality Party
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This statement was distributed outside of the Chicago Teachers Union House of Delegates meeting on Tuesday, called to decide whether to continue the strike. The divided body voted to end the strike. (See, “Delegates meeting votes to end Chicago teachers strike.”)

Teachers’ delegates are meeting today to once again make a fateful decision. On Sunday, the House took a principled and courageous stand in refusing to return to work. Now, two days later, the CTU leadership is seeking an end to the strike on the basis of the same contract that was presented at the last meeting.

If the strike is ended today, delegates will in effect be giving a vote of approval for the contract on the table. If teachers return to work now, to vote on the deal in three to four weeks, all momentum will be lost and the initiative will be placed firmly in the hands of the Emanuel administration. This would be a significant setback in the struggle to defend public education, not only in Chicago but throughout the country.

A reading of the contract as provided by the CTU leadership confirms that the agreement accepts all the basic demands of the Emanuel administration—particularly as applies to test-based evaluation systems and the elimination of job security for teachers. Under the cynical and hypocritical pretext of making teachers “accountable,” the administration wants to create the basis for mass layoffs as it shuts down up to 120 public schools—one fifth of the district—and expands for-profit charters.

What is at stake is the very future of the public education system. The politicians who speak on behalf of the corporations and the wealthy—both Democrat and Republican—see the economic crisis as an opportunity to undermine an institution with roots going back to the American Revolution. Chicago is a test case in the reactionary school “reform” agenda of the Obama

administration.

The attack on public education is part of an effort to rip up every social gain made by working people over generations of struggle. This explains the determination to force the contract through as rapidly as possible. It also explains the unanimity of the political and media establishment in their anger, bordering on hysteria, over the stand that teachers have taken, which has been treated as something akin to a slave rebellion.

Whatever their attempts to intimidate teachers, it is Emanuel who is on the defensive. The administration has staked its strategy on utilizing the CTU leadership to get teachers to agree to the concessions contract. The action of the House of Delegates on Sunday has raised concerns that this might not be possible.

The *Chicago Tribune* writes this morning that President Karen Lewis’ “biggest challenge” is to “curb the vitriol” of teachers long enough to “seal a deal.” Lewis and the rest of the CTU leadership came to power presenting themselves as a more militant opposition to the city government and Chicago Public Schools. Now they are trying to force through a contract no different than what would have been agreed to by the previous leadership. The *Tribune*, viciously opposed to teachers, recognizes in Lewis an ally in a common campaign.

If this proves impossible, the city is holding out Plan B: repression and mass arrests. The move by Emanuel to seek a court injunction to declare the strike illegal is a step in this direction. It is also intended to intimidate teachers into “voting correctly” at today’s meeting—a hope that Lewis and the rest of the CTU leadership share.

Two paths lay before teachers.

One is to accept defeat, return to work, and agree to what Emanuel is demanding. This is what Lewis and company will counsel today. They will say that the contract is the best that can be reached. It is “the deal

we got,” as Lewis and CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey said repeatedly on Sunday. This is what Emanuel and CPS are offering, they will insist, and there is no choice but for teachers to accept it.

The leadership has already made clear that it has no plans to fight for anything better. They accept entirely the claim that there is “no money” to provide for decent public education. It is an “austerity contract” in tough economic times, as Lewis said this morning. As for the shutdown of schools, Lewis is on record saying that she wants to work with CPS to ensure that this is done in a “reasonable way.” If this is the case, what was the point of the strike?

The second path is to expand the struggle. It is to reject the defeatism of the CTU leadership. It is to reject the claim that there is no money, under conditions in which trillions are handed out to the banks. The entire budget deficit for Chicago Public Schools is less than the wealthiest hedge fund managers “earn” in a single year.

Nothing in this country was won without a fight. Chicago is the home of the struggle for the eight-hour day, which was won through protracted and bitter conflict with the corporations and government. From the mass movements for industrial unions to the prohibition of child labor, the struggle for civil rights and social reforms—all were the byproduct of revolutionary upheavals. Thus it was, and so it is today.

The defense of public education must be waged on a new basis. The conduct of the strike must be taken out of the hands of the CTU leadership through the establishment of an independent strike committee. The struggle cannot be subordinated to the union’s political alliance with the Democratic Party and what the corporate establishment says is “affordable.” The defense and vast improvement of public education are possible only by breaking the stranglehold of the banks through the reorganization of society to meet social need, not private profit.

Teachers, you are not alone in your struggle!

A determined fight by teachers against the corporate and financial elite will win mass support. The media attempts to demoralize teachers by insisting that a continuation of the strike will result in public opposition.

The exact opposite is the case! The greatest fear of

the corporate elite is that this strike will become the starting point for a much broader struggle of the working class. But this is also the teachers’ greatest strength. There is immense popular sympathy for the teachers. Finally, someone has taken a stand!

Threats of an injunction can be countered only through the broadest possible mobilization of the working class, including preparations for a general strike. City workers, firefighters, state employees—all confront the determination of the Emanuel administration to attack jobs and wages and rip up health care and pensions. Mass unemployment, poverty wages, rising costs—this is the “new normal” forced on every section of the working class.

Throughout the city, the United States and around the world, workers are looking for a way to fight back. For far too long have the dictates of the wealthy gone without challenge! For far too long have the unions succeeded in channeling and suppressing mass discontent! A determined stand by Chicago teachers will win the sympathy of workers the world over.

Expand the strike! No to school closures and privatization! Mobilize the entire working class to defend public education!



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