

Without final contract, Chicago Teachers Union pushes for end to strike

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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is pushing for a rapid end to the strike of 26,000 teachers along lines dictated by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Even though a contract has not yet been finalized, the CTU has indicated it is hoping to send teachers back to work on Monday.

The union is seeking to end the strike even though the teachers have won widespread support from workers in Chicago and throughout the country. A rally planned for Saturday is expected to attract tens of thousands of people, with buses arriving from other states.

The CTU is worried that a prolonged strike will escape its control and develop into a broader struggle against the Obama administration, which fully backs the attack on teachers being carried out by Emanuel. The union is prepared to sacrifice the basic interests of its members to maintain its political alliance with the Democratic Party.

On Friday, both the CTU and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials said they had agreed on the “framework” of an agreement, which they hoped to finalize over the weekend. On Friday afternoon, the CTU held a meeting of the House of Delegates, comprised of about 800 teachers, including representatives from each school. The delegates must vote to end the strike, though the membership as a whole will get to vote on the final agreement only some two weeks later.

CTU officials had said they wanted to get a vote Friday to end the strike before a final deal was even worked out. In the end, the union decided to delay the vote until Sunday. President Karen Lewis said at a press conference after the delegates’ meeting, “Delegates were not interested in blindly signing off on

something they have not seen”—precisely what the CTU had originally planned to do.

Lewis refused repeatedly to provide any information on what concessions the union had made. “Creative thinking” was involved, she said. “They thought about some stuff, and we thought about some stuff.” Lewis said that the union was not going to provide any information to members before the Sunday meeting.

It was left to Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization and vice president of the CTU, to provide the most contorted justification for the union’s refusal to release any details to the teachers. There are “pretty high stakes attached” to a vote, he said. “If our membership looks at a detailed summary of an entire contract document and rejects it, then we are still on strike.”

Sharkey worried that “if people can’t look at the settlement as a whole, that undercuts that process.” This, he explained, is “why we are being circumspect” by not saying anything about what the CTU had agreed to.

In other words, the CTU has agreed to massive concessions but does not want to reveal them without carefully packaging them together with supposed “victories.” If the union capitulation is not properly sugar-coated, the delegates might vote to continue the strike—something the union is determined to avoid at all costs.

For his part, Mayor Emanuel showed less circumspection. He praised the deal, saying the “tentative framework is an honest and principled compromise” that “preserves more time for learning in the classroom, provides more support for teachers to excel at their craft, and gives principals the latitude and responsibility to build an environment in which our children can succeed.”

Providing “more time for learning in the classroom” is a reference to the lengthening of the school day without compensation to the teachers; providing “support for teachers to excel at their craft” is a euphemism for a standardized test-based evaluation system; more “latitude” for principals means gutting recall rights for laid off teachers.

The little information that has come out in the press makes clear that the CTU has agreed to the virtual elimination of job security for teachers. Under a new system, “student growth”—primarily standardized testing—will make up 35 percent and possibly 40 percent of a teacher’s total evaluation. Non-tenured teachers will be subject to immediate dismissal if they are deemed “unsatisfactory” on this basis, and tenured teachers can be dismissed after one year.

Lewis’ only substantive comment at the press conference was to say, when asked about the union’s attitude to the evaluation process, that it is “based on state law.” A 2011 Illinois law, passed with the support of the CTU and in response to Obama’s Race to the Top program, provides for an expansion of test-based evaluation systems.

From day one of the strike, Emanuel made clear his determination to force through measures that undermine teachers’ job security. This is part of an overall strategy of dismantling the public education system.

The Emanuel administration has plans to shut down up to 120 public schools over the next five years, laying off thousands of teachers in the process. It is withholding details of these plans until after the strike is ended, with the understanding that there will be massive opposition among teachers. Emanuel is also planning to vastly expand the network of for-profit charter schools.

The mayor’s demands are supported by the mass media and both the Democrats and Republicans at the national level—with Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan declaring that education “reform” is a “bipartisan issue.” Emanuel is carrying out in Chicago what the Obama administration is implementing at the national level.

The CTU has already signed on to these plans, with Lewis saying that it is only a matter of implementing them in a “reasonable way.”



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