

Ratification of Chicago teachers contract sets stage for assault on public education

Joseph Kishore
5 October 2012

Chicago teachers have voted to accept a contract supported by both the administration of Democratic Party Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Chicago Teachers Union. The vote on the contract came two weeks after a CTU delegates meeting ended the seven-day-long strike of 26,000 teachers.

The new contract includes all the essential demands of Emanuel, including the expansion of the school day and year without increased pay, the establishment of a test-based evaluation system and broad powers of principals to hire and fire teachers regardless of seniority. These measures are aimed at victimizing teachers for the crisis of public education. They are the preparation for administration plans to shut down up to 120 schools over the next five years and lay off thousands of teachers.

The vote (with 79 percent in favor) came after an extensive campaign by the CTU to promote the agreement as a “historic” victory. This involved lying about and distorting the content of the contract provisions. For example, the CTU hailed as “ensuring job security” a measure that would encourage, but does not even require, the school board to fill one half of new positions with laid-off teachers.

A leading role in selling the deal was played by the International Socialist Organization, whose members have leadership positions in the CTU. While posturing as “left,” the ISO functions as a faction of the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party establishment.

Teachers were told by the CTU that there was no better contract possible, and the union made clear that it would fight for nothing better if it were rejected. The return to work ended the momentum that the teachers’ struggle had, and placed the initiative in the hands of the city administration.

“This shows overwhelming recognition by our

members that this contract represents a victory for students, communities and our profession,” CTU President Karen Lewis claimed in response to the vote. For his part, Mayor Emanuel said the agreement “means a new day and a new direction for the Chicago public schools.”

Emanuel’s “new direction” includes the aim of privatizing public education and placing schools under the direct control of for-profit companies. This is part of a national agenda spearheaded by the Obama administration and supported by both big-business parties. “Pro-reform” mayors in other cities have hailed the contract as a model for the entire country.

The strike placed teachers in direct conflict with the Democratic Party and the Obama administration. Emanuel is Obama’s former chief of staff and currently a top fundraiser for the President’s reelection campaign. The union, committed to its alliance with the Democrats, worked throughout the strike to obscure this fundamental political conflict. Last week, Lewis penned an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* jointly with American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, a prominent supporter of Obama and champion of education “reform.”

The only organization campaigning against the contract was the Socialist Equality Party, which was acknowledged by the media as the voice of teacher opposition to the sellout. (See, “Vote ‘no’ on the Chicago teachers contract!”)

The utter cynicism of the union’s campaign for a “yes” vote was revealed in comments made by CTU Recording Secretary Michael Brunson at a school board meeting a week after the conclusion of the strike. Brunson called for a “truce of peace” with the board and the administration, criticizing recent ads put out by Emanuel praising the contract.

The television ads were funded by Education Reform Now Advocacy, an arm of Democrats for Education Reform. The group consists of Democratic Party officials and supporters who strongly favor the expansion of charter schools, merit pay and test-based evaluation systems to target teachers. In the ads, Emanuel is featured praising the main provisions of the new contract as a victory for this agenda.

Brunson noted that the CTU had worked with the board since last November to craft an agreement, but that this could be disrupted if the mayor was too vocal in hailing it as a victory. “Neither of us wants to win the war and lose the peace,” Brunson said. He noted that the contract in question had yet to be ratified by the membership.

According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, School Board member Penny Pritzker—a strong backer of Emanuel and Obama, and an operator of charter schools—said she appreciated the CTU’s “sentiments about a truce” and that the CPS “shares that sentiment.” This “truce” was between the union and the board—against the teachers.

In an editorial calling for teachers to vote for the contract, the *Sun-Times*—which, along with the *Chicago Tribune*, viciously attacked teachers during the strike—wrote, “There’s been talk by the union leadership since the strike ended of a truce. A resounding yes vote would help the union realize that goal.”

Such a “truce” is necessary to get the contract passed to set the stage for new attacks. “The truce is vital because the days ahead promise more conflict and strife,” the *Sun-Times* wrote. “More school closings are coming, the system faces an estimated \$1 billion deficit and pension cuts are a near certainty.”

In its own editorial, the *Tribune* wasted no time in demanding even further attacks on teachers. The newspaper cited recent decisions by Moody’s to downgrade the school district’s debts. The ratings agency declared, “The district will be hard-pressed to make the budget adjustments necessary to close an estimated \$1 billion budget cap for fiscal 2014. In particular, the duration of the recent CTU strike demonstrates that labor issues may continue to be a ratings factor.”

The *Tribune* complained that the district had not yet spelled out precisely how it was going to cut costs. Plans for school closings and attacks on teachers’

pensions had to be carried out immediately, it insisted.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact