

Vote “no” on the Chicago teachers contract!

For a political offensive of the working class to defend public education

Socialist Equality Party
1 October 2012

The following statement will be distributed to Chicago teachers voting Tuesday on a contract agreement reached by the Chicago Teachers Union and the Chicago Public Schools, following a nine-day strike last month.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers to reject the agreement reached between the Chicago Teachers Union and the Chicago Public Schools, backed by the administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Obama administration. The new contract accepts all of Emanuel’s essential demands and paves the way for the mass firing of teachers and the shutdown of over one hundred public schools.

In launching their struggle, Chicago teachers showed great determination to defend public education against the onslaught by the entire media and political establishment, including both Democrats and Republicans. However, the CTU leadership of President Karen Lewis, Vice President Jesse Sharkey and company—committed to its political alliance with the Democratic Party—ended the strike two weeks ago entirely on Emanuel’s terms.

With complete cynicism and employing Orwellian language, the CTU is now attempting to sell the agreement—which Lewis admitted was an “austerity contract”—by insisting it contains “historic gains.”

In its summary presented to teachers, the CTU includes the expansion of test-based evaluation systems—a key demand of Emanuel—under the headline of “fairer evaluation procedures.” The expansion of testing, in addition to seeking to scapegoat teachers for the crisis of public education, is aimed at creating the conditions for firing teachers on a mass scale, particularly at “underperforming schools.”

Tenured teachers will have one year before they can be fired on the basis of the new evaluation systems, while untenured teachers will be subject to immediate dismissal. Under the headline “ensures job security,” the union is promoting a measure that encourages the board to fill one half of vacancies with laid-off teachers.

In fact, the board is under no obligation to reach the one-half figure. If it falls short, some laid-off teachers will be placed in

the eligibility pool for an additional five months.

Principals will retain almost complete discretion in hiring and firing, another key demand of Emanuel. They will be “required” to interview teachers who have been laid off, and if these teachers are not hired, principals will have to inform the teacher why. “Such reasons may not be arbitrary,” the contract ensures.

The CTU is promoting as “new recall rights” a provision that supposedly requires teachers to “follow their students” in the event of a school closing. According to the contract, a laid-off teacher will be appointed to a new job where their students are transferred only if “a vacancy within the teacher’s certification has been created as a result of or in connection with the transfer of students.”

The contract abounds with such language. The great, “historic” victories hailed by the union turn out to be nothing more than hot air.

The new contract also cuts in half the number of months laid-off teachers will be eligible for full pay as substitute teachers. Health care benefits are also undermined, and there is no protection for pensions—which are being targeted by Emanuel next.

Behind the specific provisions of the contract is the basic strategy of the Emanuel administration: to cripple the city’s public education system by shutting down over 100 schools, while opening up several dozen more charters, run by private for-profit companies. Emanuel is waiting until after the contract is pushed through before revealing the details of these plans.

The Chicago strike was seen as a test case for a national program of promoting charter schools and attacking teachers. Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, a Democrat, hailed the agreement as “historic,” one that “mayors across the nation will be following.” Nutter is a champion of charter schools and has advanced the proposal of turning over the entire public system to for-profit operations.

Rejection of this rotten agreement is only a first step. A struggle to defend public education must be carried out on a new basis. In its entire conduct of the strike, including its lying campaign for a “yes” vote, the CTU has exposed the

bankruptcy of its entire perspective.

All the actions of the union have been dictated by its political alliance with the Democratic Party—the party that is currently spearheading the attack on teachers in Chicago and nationwide. The strike was first delayed until after the beginning of the school year so that it would not take place during the Democratic National Convention. At the convention itself, Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, got up to proclaim that “we”—that is, the union and the Emanuel administration—are “all Democrats.”

From the standpoint of the union, the strike was only called to let off steam while it worked out an agreement with Emanuel behind the backs of the teachers. The CTU tried to call off the strike as quickly as possible, running into stiff opposition from teachers who insisted on their right to know what was being agreed to.

Throughout the strike, the union sought to cover up the fundamental issue, that teachers were involved in a fight against the Obama administration and the entire political establishment. In carrying out their attack on public education, the Democrats and Republicans are acting on behalf of a corporate elite and in defense of a social system, capitalism, in which every decision is dictated by the interests of private profit, not social need.

Emanuel is not acting alone. He is Obama’s former chief of staff and is currently a top fundraiser for Obama’s Super-PAC. He is carrying out in Chicago what Obama is seeking to implement nationwide: the dismantling of public education.

As Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan noted at the beginning of the strike, education “reform” is a bipartisan issue. By “reform” is meant the victimization of teachers, the shutting down of public schools and the privatization of education. Since coming to office, Obama has pursued this policy systematically, including the so-called “Race to the Top” program to pressure states into adopting legislation that promotes testing and charter schools.

The unions have collaborated in this attack every step of the way. Indeed, in justifying their acceptance of the expansion of testing, the CTU argues that this is mandated by state law. The laws in question were passed with the support of the CTU in response to the Race to the Top program.

The CTU’s claim that it will carry out a struggle in defense of public education after passage of the contract is a complete fraud. In presenting a rotten sell-out to teachers, accepting the entire “austerity” framework in which the attack on public education is justified, and in insisting on a political alliance with the Democratic Party, the union has demonstrated that it is the principal obstacle to a fight to defend public education.

In carrying out this betrayal, a key role was played by the International Socialist Organization, whose member, Jesse Sharkey, is vice president of the CTU. The ISO provided the union with a “left” argument for selling the contract to teachers as some sort of victory. This supposedly “socialist”

organization has demonstrated in practice that it is merely an adjunct of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration.

A serious struggle must break free from the organizational and political straitjacket imposed by the unions and connect with the growing struggles of all sections of the working class, in the United States and internationally. It was precisely such a possibility that terrified the political establishment. They know that there is immense anger building up to the unending demands that workers give up everything to ensure the wealth and privileges of the corrupt financial elite that dictates policy.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers to form rank-and-file committees to prepare for these struggles and take them out of the hands of the union apparatus. Such committees must be based on: 1) a rejection of the claim that there is no money for decent public education, good paying jobs and benefits; and 2) complete independence from the existing unions and the Democratic and Republican Parties.

The defense of teachers and public education is fundamentally a political struggle against the entire economic and social system, capitalism. In the defense of its interests, the American ruling class is taking an axe to every social right of the working class, even those—such as public education—that have roots in the American Revolution itself. Whoever is elected in November, Obama or Romney, this agenda will go forward with redoubled force.

The SEP is intervening in the elections with the aim of fighting for an independent socialist leadership of the working class. We urge all Chicago teachers who have gone through the experience of this strike to support our campaign and make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.

For more information on the SEP and to get involved, click here.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact