

ISO paves way for Chicago school closures

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Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Chicago Public Schools district (CPS) are moving ahead with plans to close as many as 120 public schools, and open up 60 new charter schools over the next few years. About 140 schools have been identified by the district as half-empty, and are expected to be the first targeted for closure. The closings would eliminate the jobs of thousands of teachers and school support staff.

On Monday, the Democratic mayor announced a proposal for a five-year moratorium on school closings—but only after the next wave of shutdowns in 2013.

The list of schools targeted for closure is supposed to be released on December 1, but CPS has petitioned for a four-month extension in order to stem the mass opposition to the closures. The formation of a school closures commission and the holding of a series of public hearings are being proposed in order to give the process a democratic veneer.

In reality, the decision to close the schools has already been made. With the backing of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Emanuel is carrying out in Chicago the anti-teacher and school privatization scheme that President Obama is championing on the national level.

The path for this was paved by the betrayal of the nine-day strike of 26,000 teachers last September by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), headed by president Karen Lewis and vice-president Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). With the demobilization of teachers and the collaboration of the CTU, Emanuel feels he has a green light to proceed.

Over the last month the CTU and the ISO have organized a series of protests ostensibly opposing the school closings, including a November 2 sit-in at City Hall. While presenting themselves as leaders of the

struggle against school closures and privatization, an examination of the public statements of the CTU leaders and their political alliances reveals the opposite.

In remarks to a November 11 rally, Sharkey said the school board's effort to delay the release of the school closure list was a recognition that its policy was "disorganized" and "in a shambles." He warned the board that delaying the announcement of the targeted schools would not lessen popular opposition.

He continued: "What the school board should do is take a year off. Have a moratorium on school closings and have a real process where there is a study of plans and the people who are part of the coalition here, the parents, the community and the teachers of Chicago have real input into what happens to our schools."

In other words, Sharkey and the CTU have no disagreement in principle with school closings and privatization. But if the school board and Mayor Emanuel want to avoid a social explosion they need to develop a "real plan"—with input from the CTU and others—for a more orderly shutdown of schools.

The CTU is closely aligned with Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH and various middle-class black and Latino "community groups" tied to the Democratic Party. Like the CTU apparatus, these forces are no doubt looking for a way to get a share of the spoils from carve-up from the public school system by big business. For the CTU, this primarily means getting union dues from the low-paid charter school teachers. For others it means access to lucrative business contracts and perhaps even the keys to new charter school operations.

Sharkey deliberately concealed the class interests and political forces behind the destruction of public education. He said nothing about the role of President Obama and the Democratic Party, whose educational "reform" was in line with the rest of this pro-big business agenda. Instead, Sharkey claimed the school

closure and privatization plan was “deeply racist.” Such an injection of racial politics—long the modus operandi of the ISO and other pseudo-left groups—is aimed at dividing the working class and blocking any unified struggle to defend public education.

The fight against school closures and privatization was a central issue animating teachers during the nine-day strike last summer and there was widespread support in the working class in Chicago and nationally for a fight against the destruction of public education.

The response of the CTU—with the full backing of the ISO—was to move as quickly as possible to shut the strike down and prevent it from erupting into an explicit political struggle against the Democrats and Obama, particularly on the eve of the national elections.

During a September 12 press conference in the midst of the teachers’ strike, CTU President Lewis made it clear that the union was not opposed to the closings but only wanted to play a consultative role. “We understand the whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively,” Lewis declared. “We either do this together in some reasonable way or we will always be fighting, and I think the key is that the people that are making these decisions want to make them unilaterally.”

The CTU deliberately sabotaged the strike, trying to push through a contract that teachers had not viewed, and lying to teachers about the contents of the agreement. They said they would not negotiate for anything more, and made it clear they would do nothing to widen the fight in the event that Emanuel filed an injunction against striking teachers to force them back to work.

Endorsing the lie that there was simply not enough money to guarantee decent living standards for teachers and good schools, Lewis declared that teachers had no choice but to accept an “austerity contract” because it was “tough economic times.”

The terms of the contract agreement—which includes cutting the time teachers remain in a displaced teachers’ pool with full pay and benefits from 10 months to five—facilitates plans to close schools and lay off teachers. Notably, the contract fulfilled virtually all key demands of Emanuel and education “reformers”, including codifying principals’ authority to hire and fire teachers, and enforcing for the first time in a contract test-based teacher evaluation.

Sharkey and the ISO declared this sellout a “victory.” In a final press conference, Sharkey provided political justification for the betrayal, arguing that many other teachers’ unions had gotten even worse contracts. He sought to reassure teachers that the “struggle wasn’t over” and promised that the CTU would now lead a “political struggle” against school closures and “reforms”.

The fact is the CTU and ISO sabotaged a mass struggle of 26,000 teachers precisely because it was evolving into a political fight against the Democratic Party and an explicit challenge to the “right” of government and big business to close schools and privatize them.

Throughout the strike, the CTU and the ISO did everything they could to prevent workers from drawing the most essential political lesson: that only through a political break with the Democratic Party and a conscious political struggle by the working class against the economic dictatorship of the banks and big corporations can the resources be found to defend and vastly improve public education.

Whatever “socialist” or radical phrases they employ, in the end, the ISO demonstrated that it is nothing more than a tool of the Democratic Party and an essential prop of the capitalist political establishment. In the struggle between the working class on one side, and the unions, the Democratic Party and big business on the other, the ISO is on the other side of the barricades. This is the only way its current protests “against” school closings and the future role of this organization can be understood.



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