

Australia's Socialist Alternative hails betrayal of Chicago teachers strike as a victory

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More than four months after a strike by more than 26,000 teachers in Chicago, Illinois was betrayed by their union, the Australian pseudo-left organisation Socialist Alternative has published an article hailing the defeat as a victory, and holding it up as a model for teachers in Australia.

The Chicago teachers' strike, their first in 25 years, was part of a growing rebellion by American workers against the corporate onslaught on jobs and conditions, which has accelerated under the Obama administration. It took place as the working class in Europe, the UK and many other countries has begun to fight back against austerity cuts to healthcare, education and other social entitlements.

More than any other strike in the United States, the teachers were pitted openly and directly against the Obama administration, whose "Race To the Top" education agenda is aimed at tearing up public education by expanding test-based teacher evaluations, shutting down public schools and expanding privately-run charter operations. Since Obama's election in 2008, more than 300,000 teaching positions have been destroyed.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, a Democrat and former chief of staff and leading fundraiser for Obama, was spearheading this national agenda. He was backed by the media and the corporate elite, along with local and federal politicians—both Democratic and Republican—who viewed it as a step forward in the process of dismantling public education.

The logic of the teachers' struggle thus posed the necessity of a broader industrial and political offensive of the working class as a whole against the Obama administration and the corporate and financial elite, and against the capitalist profit system itself.

From the beginning, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), backed by the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO), worked to shut down the strike and prevent such a development. The ISO's leading member, Jesse Sharkey, is the CTU's vice president. Along with other members of the nominally "left" CORE faction of the union bureaucracy, he was elected to the leadership in 2010, as a result of teachers' hostility to the open collaborationism of the previous leadership.

The principal concern of the ISO and CTU was to obscure the political dimensions of the teachers' strike, and to prevent, at all costs, a political conflict between teachers on the one hand, and the Obama administration and Democratic Party on the other. The union invited Democratic Party speakers to address the teachers at public rallies, while the ISO functioned as nothing more than flunkies for the union, and as the "left" flank of the Democrats.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (US) warned about the role of these organisations and fought for teachers to take the struggle out of the hands of the CTU and establish rank-and-file committees to take leadership of the strike. A September 18 WSWS perspective declared: "Regardless of the opposition of the teachers, the CTU is determined to push through a sell-out ... The policy of the CTU is determined not by teachers, but by the bureaucracy's political alliance with the Democratic Party and its acceptance of and support for the existing capitalist set-up."

It did not take long for this warning to be vindicated. Just two days after the CTU's sell-out contract was rejected by a delegates' meeting, Sharkey and Lewis called another meeting and succeeded in pressuring the delegates to vote for the exact same contract and end the strike.

The CTU had accepted all of Emanuel's demands, including an increase in the length of the school day and year without any extra pay, the expansion of a test-based evaluation system as a means of firing teachers immediately—and tenured teachers after one year—and the granting of broad powers to principals to hire and fire teachers regardless of seniority. The new contract also cut in half, from ten to five months, the period that sacked teachers could receive full pay as substitute teachers.

Within months, the Emanuel administration was utilising the CTU's sell-out deal to close more than 120 schools and sack thousands of teachers.

Socialist Alternative in Australia, which maintains close political relations with the ISO, has now thrown its support behind the CTU's betrayal. The central purpose of its article, written by Manolya Moustafa and published on January 15 under the headline, "Lessons from the Chicago Teachers'

Strike,” is to confuse Australian teachers about the real lessons of the Chicago strike, in order to assist the teachers’ union here to carry out the same disastrous policies.

Members of Socialist Alternative and fellow pseudo-left organisation Socialist Alliance lead the Teachers and Education Support Alliance (TESA)—a faction within the AEU that postures as a “rank and file” alternative to the current leadership; although in reality it functions as a loyal adjunct of the bureaucracy.

The essential thrust of Socialist Alternative’s assessment of the Chicago strike is contained in its opening paragraph: “With the negotiations between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the government at an impasse it’s critical we look at a recent inspiring example of the Chicago teachers’ strike. It shows what’s possible when teachers shut down the school system for a prolonged period of time.”

The timing of the article is significant, coming as the AEU’s branch in Victoria, a state with a long history of militant industrial action by teachers, is engaged in negotiations with Victorian Liberal Premier Ted Baillieu over a new three-year enterprise bargaining agreement. The Baillieu government is determined to impose a real wage cut on Victorian teachers—in line with its policy of a 2.5 percent wage ceiling for public sector employees—and also introduce so-called performance pay, sack five percent of the total teaching workforce, and tie public schools to various corporate “partnerships”.

Baillieu is working closely with the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, which is spearheading a national assault on public education. Gillard’s “Education Revolution” policy, modelled on the Obama administration’s education “reform” agenda, has established NAPLAN standardised testing and the “MySchool” performance ranking web site as a means of scapegoating teachers and schools for the crisis in public education—caused by chronic underfunding—and closing so-called “underperforming” schools.

The AEU has fully backed Gillard’s NAPLAN testing regime. It has sought to obscure the role of the Gillard Labor government in the current dispute, and made clear it will do nothing to disrupt its agenda. In November last year, the AEU—without any prior discussion or consultation with the membership—dropped its 30 percent wage claim in an unsuccessful bid to reach a deal with Baillieu.

This unilateral concession has only encouraged the state government to refuse any compromise and press ahead with its wider agenda of undermining the public education system through various “performance” benchmarks. Many teachers are increasingly uneasy about the impasse in the EBA negotiations, and are concerned that the union is preparing to announce another sell out agreement. In this context, Socialist Alternative is fearful that any industrial action could develop out of the control of the AEU and threaten to become the catalyst for a broader industrial and political struggle against both the

Baillieu Liberal and Gillard Labor governments and their entire corporate austerity agenda.

Moustafa, however, writes: “We need to learn a lesson from union history: neither of the major parties are friends of public education. Rahm Emanuel is a Democrat, the ‘lesser evil’ in US politics, but this did not stop the CTU from waging a fightback. We can’t wait for Labor to be elected, we need to fight now and send a clear message to whoever is elected in the next election that we will not allow public education to be undermined.”

In reality, the greatest concern of the CTU and ISO was to obscure the fact that teachers were engaged in a political struggle not just against Emanuel, but against the Obama administration and its national education “reform”. Far from being a “lesser evil”, Obama has deepened the assault of his Republican predecessors on public education, and on every other social right of the working class.

Socialist Alternative’s insistence that teachers concentrate all their focus on pressuring the next government to back down on education cuts is motivated by the same concerns. Like the ISO, it represents the interests of an affluent section of the upper middle class, which is deeply hostile to the working class. In the coming struggles of Victorian teachers, it fears nothing more than the development of a politically conscious movement that breaks out of the straitjacket of the AEU and fights to turn out to and mobilise other sections of the working class in a unified struggle against the Gillard Labor government and its pro-capitalist agenda.

That is why Socialist Alternative, along with all the other pseudo-left tendencies, will, in one way or another, line up behind the “lesser-evil” campaign in this year’s federal election, in order, once again, to tie workers to Labor—just as the ISO fought to subordinate American workers to the Obama Democrats in last year’s US presidential election.



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