

Chicago officials release final list of 49 school closures

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In the face of mass opposition, the Chicago Board of Education released its final list of school closings Wednesday, announcing the closure of 49 elementary schools and one high school program this year. The city has shuttered public schools every year since 2001, but the latest round is the largest yet, and one of the biggest mass shutdowns of schools in US history.

Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel's plan to close a record number of schools was a major point of contention during the strike of 26,000 Chicago teachers last September. Since February, more than 20,000 parents, teachers, and students attended official hearings on the closures to express their angry opposition.

How, then, is it possible that city leaders are moving ahead with the school closing plan? Nearly a year ago, teachers voted by 90 percent to strike and won popular support for the fight against the attack on public education. How was this determined opposition squandered?

In short, the struggle by teachers, parents and students was sabotaged by the Chicago Teachers Union, which betrayed last year's strike and has worked might and main to prevent a political break by the working class from Emanuel and Obama's Democratic Party. Providing critical assistance to the CTU has been the pseudo-left group, the International Socialist Organization, whose leading member, Jesse Sharkey, is vice-president of the union.

Sharkey and CTU President Karen Lewis are the leaders of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), the leading faction of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which postures as opponents of the corporate-driven attack on public education, the closure of schools and expansion of charter schools.

Tapping into the deep discontent with the CTU leadership, in June 2010, CORE overwhelmingly defeated the United Progressive Caucus, which had openly collaborated with the reactionary school "reform" agenda spearheaded by former CPS CEO and now Obama's education secretary Arne Duncan. Subjected to mass layoffs, school closures, expansion of charter schools and victimization through

standardized testing and other arbitrary evaluation measures—and without a strike in more than 20 years—teachers were looking for a way to fight.

CORE presented itself as more militant than the previous leadership, willing to use "social justice unionism" to fight against school privatization. Within a matter of months, however, CORE proved to have no major political differences with the faction it deposed, and would take measures even more right-wing than its predecessors.

From the summer of 2010 through 2011, more than 1,750 teachers were laid off, in violation of their tenure and seniority rights. During the same period, CORE leaders worked with Illinois Democratic and Republican legislators to draft Senate Bill 7, which severely limited teachers' right to strike, expanded the use of standardized tests to fire teachers, and allowed for school districts to extend the length of school days and years without additional compensation.

Throughout its tenure, the CORE leadership has promoted impotent discrimination lawsuits as a means to dissipate opposition to mass layoffs and school closures, while the suits themselves languish in the courts. Recently, CORE has filed two more lawsuits that allege the school closures are racist, concealing the class character of the attack on the public education and aiding the Democratic Party in dividing the working class along racial lines.

Confronted with teachers' opposition to Obama's reactionary education agenda, CTU launched a seven-day long strike on September 10, 2012. The planned school closures were a central issue raised by teachers during the strike. Despite this, CTU officials insisted it was illegal to strike over school closings. This was in part due to restrictions they had worked to impose through Senate Bill 7, which prevents teachers from striking on issues they cannot collectively bargain on—namely, working conditions.

During the strike Karen Lewis made clear that the union was not opposed in principle to mass school closings, telling the *Chicago Tribune* on September 12, "We understand that whole movement of closing schools and doing it

aggressively. The problem is—I guess that’s why we’re all here—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.”

Against the will of teachers, and the interests of students, teachers and parents, CTU pursued its goal of settling the strike on terms friendly to Emanuel, and integrating itself into the process of closing schools. Behind the scenes, the union was given access to organize low-paid and highly exploited charter school teachers, guaranteeing the continued flow of dues into the CTU apparatus as dozens of schools were closed, hundreds of teachers laid off and public education privatized.

The contract CTU leaders negotiated with the city thoroughly exposed the class character of the CORE faction. It containing all of Emanuel’s demands, including the right of principals to hire and fire teachers, expanding the use of tests in teacher evaluations, and severely weakening job security. Each of these provisions facilitated the school closures and consolidations now being implemented.

CTU, as well as its pseudo-left and liberal supporters in the ISO and at *The Nation* magazine, declared the contract a historic victory and the strike a rebirth of militant trade unionism. With far more justification, Emanuel too declared the contract a victory, to the consternation of CORE leaders, who called for a truce with the city.

From the very start, the CTU was preoccupied with preventing the strike from developing into an open political confrontation with Emanuel and the Obama administration and a counter-offensive against the war on teachers and public education throughout the US. The CTU even delayed the start of the strike until after the Democratic Party convention nominated Obama for re-election. In justifying the shutdown of the strike and the sellout agreement the CTU leaders repeated Emanuel’s lie that there was not enough money to pay for decent schools and teachers, with Lewis telling her members they had no choice but to accept an “austerity contract” because of the “hard times” in the US. After its first attempt to ram through the sellout was defeated by a delegates meeting, Lewis and Sharkey pushed the deal through on a second vote after telling members this was Emanuel’s last offer and they would not go back to negotiate anything better.

Having demobilized the teachers and prevented a showdown with Emanuel, and Obama behind him, the path was cleared for the mayor to press ahead with his school closing plan. After this was announced, the CTU encouraged complacency during the months-long series of CPS hearings on school closures, encouraging teachers and parents to take part in the sham hearings, while warning teachers—many

who would soon be laid off—to support the union as it facilitated the closures.

Despite phony rhetoric from Karen Lewis about “shutting down the city” during protests called by the CTU against the closures earlier this spring, these were nothing but stunts aimed at promoting local Democratic politicians, including Jesse Jackson, as supposed friends of public education. A similar series of small protests were held last weekend, to provide a further cover for the CTU’s collaboration in the school closings.

Teachers’ discontent with these betrayals was manifest in last week’s CTU election. While CORE again defeated the despised former ruling faction, United Progressive Caucus—receiving 80 percent of the votes cast—an estimated 10,500 out of 26,000 CTU members refused to vote. Despite the claims by the ISO and the *Nation* that it won a sweeping mandate for its policies, CORE was supported by only 49 percent of the total membership.

At last weekend’s protests against the school closures, WSWs reporters spoke with parents and teachers on the city’s south and west sides. One teacher stated, “It’s about the haves and have-nots and that’s why I’m here at the march. I never trusted Obama just because he was black. When he became president his entire agenda was about promoting charter schools.”

Sherize, a parent opposed to the school closings, said, “I’m outraged at the school closings. My children’s school is not closing, but this is happening on the backs of all working people. The Democrats, Obama, Rahm, Duncan, they’re all out for themselves. When Obama nominated (Chicago billionaire) Penny Pritzker to his cabinet, this was the biggest slap in the face. It shows who’s in charge in politics today.”

Sherize noted, “I’ve talked to a lot of teachers and they feel like they’ve been sold out by Karen Lewis.”



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