

The betrayal of the Chicago teachers strike: One year on

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One year ago, on September 18, 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) shut down the nine-day strike by 26,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers. The defeat of the strike cleared the way for the acceleration of school closings and other attacks on public education not only in Chicago but throughout the US.

The teachers walked out after years of assaults on their jobs and living standards in the city where Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, first tested out what would become the administration's reactionary "school reform" agenda of dismantling public education. The strike placed teachers in a direct conflict with Obama and Chicago mayor and former Obama aide Rahm Emanuel, who made the corporate-backed attack on public education a defining political goal of his administration.

Though the struggle—the first Chicago teachers strike in 25 years—had broad support in the working class, this potential could not be mobilized because striking teachers confronted an intransigent enemy not only in the Democratic mayor, but also in the Chicago Teachers Union itself.

From the outset, CTU President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), did everything they could to prevent the strike from becoming a catalyst for a broader political mobilization of the working class against the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

One year later, the devastating consequences of this betrayal are evident as the largest mass school closure in US history takes effect. Fifty public schools have been closed, 3,500 teachers and school workers laid off, and instruction in foreign languages and the arts slashed. In addition to classroom overcrowding and mass layoffs, the school closures force children to

travel longer distances through dangerous areas, placing them at risk of street violence.

The contract ratified one year ago affords principals the right to hire and fire teachers, the right to fire non-tenured teachers immediately and dismiss tenured teachers after a year, to extend working hours by lengthening the school day and year without additional compensation, and to expand the use of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations. All of these measures have aided the city in the closure and layoff process.

The impact of the sellout extended well beyond Chicago. In Philadelphia, Emanuel's Democratic counterpart, Mayor Michael Nutter, took the defeat of the Chicago strike as a green light to shutter dozens of schools in 2013. Since the strike, mass school closings have also occurred in Washington, DC, New York City and Detroit, with the sanction of the local affiliates of the CTU's parent union, the American Federation Teachers.

The new school year sees "reform" being implemented across the nation, with expanded use of standardized tests to victimize teachers, close so-called failing schools and replace them with charter schools. Arts, history, language, and literature classes are being gutted to make way for a "Common Core" curriculum tailored directly to the needs of corporate America.

A month after the defeated strike, the CTU executive board endorsed the reelection of Obama, sanctioning a president who has overseen the destruction of 350,000 teachers' and other education workers' jobs and the closure of more than 4,000 schools since taking office in 2009. Meanwhile, the number of students enrolled in privately run and publicly funded charter schools has increased from 1.3 million in 2008 to an estimated 2.3 million in 2013.

In a series of YouTube videos on the anniversary of

the 2012 strike, Karen Lewis declared, “We have to understand that sometimes a win, it’s bigger than it really looks.” Marking the anniversary, socialistworker.org, the web site of the ISO, praised the “boldness” of the CTU and its willingness to “risk everything to win a victory.”

At the very end of this lying article, ISO writer Lee Sustar concedes, “The strike didn’t halt corporate education reform in Chicago, where neighborhood school closures proceed and charter school proliferation continues.”

Nevertheless, he insists, “the CTU’s resistance” was “an example of what working people can achieve when they’re united and take collective action.”

These self-serving remarks are not directed to teachers—who know this is nonsense—but the privileged stratum of upper-middle class union executives who are increasingly facing the hostility of rank-and-file teachers. The unrelenting destruction of public education—intensified under Obama—has undermined the unions’ promotion of the Democrats and is driving increasing numbers of teachers, workers and youth towards more radical solutions.

During the strike, the Socialist Equality Party emerged as the only genuine opposition to the CTU betrayal and fought to give political expression to the growing opposition of teachers. This made it impossible for the CTU to shut down the strike initially without even showing the tentative agreement to the members.

On the eve of the sellout, the WSWS wrote, “The CTU leadership, which postures as ‘left,’ will inevitably present the deal as a victory for teachers, attempting to palm off a few pennies here or there as great concessions from the administration. The real reason the union is ending the strike, however, is that it is terrified the struggle could get outside of its control and develop into a political offensive against the Democratic Party, with which the unions are politically aligned.”

We concluded, “A fight to defend public education is necessary, but such a struggle cannot be carried out within the framework of the CTU, the Democratic Party and the capitalist two-party system.”

In shutting down the strike, CTU President Lewis assured Mayor Emanuel that the union was not opposed to mass school closings but only wanted them to be

carried out “together in a reasonable way,” rather than unilaterally. Shortly after betraying the strike, the CTU got its payoff: permission to organize teachers at one of the city’s largest charter schools—owned by a close affiliate of Emanuel. This ensured a continued flow of dues money to the union executives even as it sanctioned the elimination of the jobs of 4,000 public school teachers.

Just as the ISO and its affiliates do internationally—supporting US imperialist intervention in Syria and blocking the revolutionary strivings of the Egyptian working class—in the US the ISO is a prop for the Democratic Party and the discredited and pro-capitalist trade unions.

Teachers must draw the political conclusions from the betrayal of the Chicago strike.

The unrelenting destruction of public education—from Bush to Obama—is one of the most glaring exposures of the bankruptcy of the profit system. The financial aristocracy, which rules America, cannot tolerate an educated and critically thinking population. It is determined to dismantle public education and condemn the majority of the next generation to ignorance and poverty.

That is why the fight to defend public education is above all a political struggle. If the wealth created by the working class is to be utilized to raise the cultural and material level of the masses, not further enrich Wall Street parasites, then the working class must take political power in its own hands and carry out the socialist reorganization of economic life.

This is the program only fought for by the Socialist Equality Party. We call on all teachers to study our record and history and make the decision to join and build the SEP to lead the coming mass struggles of the working class to genuine victory.



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