

Chicago Teachers Union launches “independent” political organization

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20 January 2014

Earlier this month, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) formed an “Independent Political Organization” (IPO) that will support candidates in upcoming elections in the state of Illinois. The new formation has brought the CTU and other unions together with an array of liberal and pseudo-left organizations, from the International Socialist Organization (one of whose members is the vice president of the CTU), to Socialist Alternative, the Green Party, and Action Now (formerly ACORN).

Far from establishing “independence,” the aim of the new organization is to maintain the domination of the big business political establishment over the working class.

According to a resolution passed by the CTU leadership, the IPO “will enable a broad multitude of diverse organizations to establish a pipeline for candidate development to identify and train people who are part of our movements to become elected officials.” The resolution does not stipulate that these individuals be independent of the Democratic Party.

After emphasizing that the organization is not a political party, CTU President Karen Lewis declared, “We need to change the political landscape in this state. We need new voters.” The CTU has in recent weeks solicited teachers and other workers to devote time and effort and contribute large sums of money, in part through increased union dues.

The new formation has the support of the Progressive Democrats of America and several unions that are strong financial backers of the Democratic Party, including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and UNITE HERE.

The IPO is being framed as a means of defending public education against attacks led by Chicago’s Democratic mayor, Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s former chief of staff. In fact, the CTU has played a critical role in facilitating the attack on public education, most notably by betraying the 2012 Chicago teachers strike and suppressing opposition

to school closures and attacks on teachers. The IPO is a continuation of this process.

In September 2012, the CTU ended a militant strike by teachers, broadly backed by working people in the city and region, after only one week. The union pushed through a contract along the lines demanded by Mayor Emanuel, who shortly afterward announced plans for the closure of scores of schools. Throughout the strike, the CTU did everything it could to prevent the work stoppage from developing into a political struggle against the Democratic Party establishment. (See: “Lessons of the Chicago Teachers Strike”).

In justifying its capitulation to Emanuel, the CTU leadership, in particular, Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), argued that not everything could be won in a strike. School closures and the attack on teachers would be resolved, Sharkey said, in “a political struggle to come.”

After demobilizing the teachers, the CTU collaborated with the Emanuel administration to maintain order during the school closures. As a reward, one of city’s largest charter school operators—run by a key Emanuel ally—agreed to recognize a union associated with the CTU.

The turn to “political struggle” by the CTU is really about strengthening the union’s ties (and those of the ISO) to the Democratic Party, while posturing at being “politically independent” in front of teachers and other workers who are disgusted with the right-wing policies of Emanuel, who is seeking reelection in February 2015, and disillusioned with the Obama administration nationally.

Three months ago, the CTU and the SEIU organized a “Take Back Chicago” demonstration, a precursor to the IPO, whose purpose was to present a “left,” oppositional face in light of widespread discontent among teachers and other workers.

At the “Take Back Chicago” rally, Democratic Party

aldermen declared support for raising the minimum wage and increasing funding for public schools. The political content of the event was clearly revealed by the choice of Pat Quinn, the Democratic governor of Illinois, to be the main speaker. Last month, Quinn signed into law a bipartisan bill slashing Illinois state workers' pensions.

The IPO is a continuation of the same politics that underlay the betrayal of the teachers' strike and the "Take Back Chicago" rally. To the extent that the CTU has differences with Emanuel, they center on the union officials' concerns over defending their own income stream, not the interests of teachers.

The union has long worked with Jesse Jackson's PUSH and other Democratic Party-allied organizations that use identity politics to divide the working class while pushing for a bigger share of government contracts for African American and Hispanic businessmen.

In its article "Declaring independence in Chicago," the ISO reveals the political agenda behind the Independent Political Organization. Marilena Marchetti writes that the initiative has "significant implications for how social justice movements in Chicago can channel their energies around electoral politics." The IPO will insist, Marchetti writes, that the candidates it supports "agree to be held accountable for endorsing policies that improve the lives of working and poor people."

The author adds that "there is a question that needs to be taken up: the relationship of candidates who receive IPO support to the Democratic Party." She notes that the CTU has endorsed Democratic Party candidates, while suggesting that supporting candidates who are not nominally affiliated with the Democratic Party would be preferable. As "successful challenges to the two-party monopoly," she cites the 2000 Green Party presidential campaign of Ralph Nader and the Socialist Alternative candidate who won a seat on the Seattle City Council last year, Kshama Sawant.

Sawant's campaign, which had the backing of many of the principal unions in Seattle, is seen as a model for new political formations to prevent the emergence of a genuinely independent political movement of the working class. Nominally independent electoral fronts are to be set up which operate entirely within the framework of capitalist policies and serve as pressure groups on the Democratic Party.

The ISO characterizes Sawant's campaign as "radical left," but the capitalist establishment knows better. The *Seattle Times* noted during the campaign that Sawant's main proposals "are pretty much indistinguishable from

those of current [Democratic] Mayor Mike McGinn or his challenger, state Sen. Ed Murray."

The ISO praises the fact that Sawant "forced both Democratic candidates for mayor to support a \$15 an hour minimum wage, at least in words," and will now be able to "force other elected officials to engage with issues that typically don't find their way into the chambers of any legislative body." In the aftermath of the election, Sawant has begun to work closely with the newly elected Democratic mayor, Ed Murray.

The IPO in Chicago is part of a broader national and international regroupment within bourgeois politics. More than five years after the eruption of the economic crisis, popular discontent in the US with the two parties of big business is growing. The past five years have seen a historically unprecedented growth in social inequality that is a direct consequence of the policies of the Obama administration. The hostility toward the administration over its aggressively pro-business policies, the Obamacare fraud, and the Snowden revelations of mass government surveillance have thrown the Democratic Party into crisis. There is serious concern about a mass political radicalization.

While there are certain tactical differences among them, the Sawant campaign, the Chicago IPO, the minimum wage campaigns organized by the SEIU and the United Food and Commercial Workers, the coming to power of the new Democratic mayor of New York City, Bill De Blasio, and the Obama administration's recent call for increasing the minimum wage all share the same political purpose.

The aim is not to win reforms, but to ensure that the demands of the corporate and financial elite are imposed on the working class. The CTU and the rest of the unions, along with the functionaries who control pseudo-left organizations such as the ISO, seek to maintain their own privileged positions in the process.



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