

Chicago teachers union president offers to negotiate cuts in teacher pensions

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In an extraordinary set of statements last week highlighting her role as a political leader and ally of the ruling elite, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Karen Lewis offered to negotiate cuts to teacher pensions for active teachers, and advised the city's financial elite on how to appear less socially destructive—by accepting a tax on certain financial transactions. Lewis's interviews with the editorial boards of these media outlets take place as preparations for next year's mayoral election campaign get underway.

In a report published May 8, Lewis offered to negotiate a cut to teacher pensions for those teachers who have not yet retired. Lewis spoke to the *Crain's Chicago Business* editorial board on next year's labor contract and what sort of givebacks could be expected. On teacher pensions, she said, "There could be some modification. We're interested in talking about modifications, yes."

This proposal was lauded by the business publication, which ran, "In an uncharacteristic peace gesture, Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis says she's prepared to offer pension concessions covering thousands of her members—but only under certain circumstances."

While details were not provided, *Crain's* suggested that the pension recipients' 3 percent cost-of-living increase is what is at stake. The Chicago Teachers Pension Fund claims 44,473 members.

In the last year, the Democratic Party has led a merciless assault on worker pensions in the state of Illinois, goaded by the credit ratings agencies' series of downgrades to the state's credit rating. Last November, within hours of the Rhodes ruling on the legality of the Detroit bankruptcy law slashing pensions, the Illinois state legislature passed a bill in a special session to

raise the retirement age and cut benefits to state workers. This April, the legislature passed another bill cutting cost-of-living increases for those Chicago municipal workers and city laborers whose pensions exceed a paltry \$22,000 per year.

That the state's pension "crisis" is wholly manufactured—a product of decades of "pension holidays" taken by political leaders who chose not to make contractually obligated payments to worker pension funds—is passed over by Lewis without mention. Chicago Public Schools currently owes the teachers pension fund \$613 million.

Prior to offering up teacher pension benefits, during a meeting with the *Chicago Sun-Times* editorial board on May 6, Lewis floated the proposal of a financial transaction tax as a new source of city revenue. She suggested that a futures trade tax could help refurbish the negative image of the financial aristocracy.

"This is an opportunity to actually make heroes out of these people. Instead of everybody being angry at them about their money and their greed and all these other things. This is an opportunity for them to say, 'You know what, we're part of the city. We love this city. We'd like to see the city work. We'd like to be a part of the process and this isn't going to be enough to make us want to go.'"

A tax on futures trades was also proposed in 2011 by the CTU and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) through their "Stand Up Chicago" campaign, which was heralded as a plan to create jobs involved in cleaning and beautifying the city in order to attract businesses.

It has long been evident that Lewis and the CORE leadership of the CTU are reliable allies of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration, which has led the attack on public education. Lewis's utterly

cynical appeal to the financial elite, whose criminal role in triggering and deepening the financial collapse is known to tens of millions, ignores the fact that these elements played a significant part in looting the pension systems in Illinois, if not the teachers' pension fund itself.

Lewis's offer of pension concessions and her friendly advice to the bankers on improving their image is a clear vindication of the WSWS's assessment of the role of the CTU.

The CTU claims to represent tens of thousands of teachers who are at the forefront of the struggle against a bipartisan attack on public education. These teachers waged a determined strike in 2012 to defend their jobs and the conditions of education.

Their efforts were betrayed, however, by a leadership that worked to prevent the struggle from developing into an open political fight against the Democratic Party. The CTU worked to impose all of the demands of the Emanuel administration, paving the way for the closure of 50 schools and the loss of thousands of jobs. The result has been a further deterioration of education in the city, along with expanded charters, severe overcrowding, and extremely stressful working conditions for teachers.

The task facing teachers and workers in every sector is to develop new political leadership that is entirely independent of the bourgeoisie, its political parties and its labor managers in the trade unions. It will be necessary to build rank-and-file committees in the schools that are armed with a socialist strategy, fighting to expropriate the ill-gotten wealth of the financial industry and to invest billions in the development of public education and infrastructure.



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