

Chicago Teachers Union backs long-time Democratic Party politician for mayor

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10 December 2014

Last month, the House of Delegates of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) voted to endorse Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia in the February 2015 mayoral race against Democratic Party incumbent Rahm Emanuel. Garcia, also a Democrat, is a major ally of Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, a local party powerbroker instrumental in launching Obama’s political career.

A fixture in Chicago Democratic Party politics since the 1980s, Garcia is Preckwinkle’s floor leader on the County Commission. In that position he backed the layoff of thousands of county workers and over \$400 million in budget cuts, including \$120 million from the county public health system. Following the lead of Emanuel and Illinois’ lame duck Democratic governor, Patrick Quinn, Garcia also attacked the pensions of retired county workers.

The endorsement of a long-time Democratic Party hack by a trade union would not be particularly newsworthy except for the fact that the CTU is run by leading members of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and other trade union functionaries claiming to be “socialist” or “left.” For months they have claimed the CTU would choose a challenger to Emanuel who embodied “independent working class politics.”

In January of this year, the CTU formed an Independent Political Organization (IPO), funded in part by increased teacher dues. In an article hailing the move, the ISO wrote on its *Socialist Worker* web site, “The goal of the initiative is to unite progressive groups, nonprofit organizations and unions around political campaigns that have the potential to sustain social movements and activism, rather than empowering Democratic Party candidates who have turned their back on teachers and public education.”

Shortly thereafter, the new “independent” body endorsed Democrats Jay Travis and Will Guzzardi for the Illinois state assembly. Straining to maintain the credibility of this political fraud, *Socialist Worker* referred to the two as “progressive Democratic candidates” who, they suggested, could fight “the mainstream of the Democratic Party in the

governor’s mansion and state legislature—which is committed to an agenda of austerity and defense of corporate privilege.”

This was followed up in September by the CTU’s endorsement of Governor Quinn whose commitment to austerity has never been in doubt. Once again, the ISO sought to cover the tracks of the CTU calling its endorsement of Quinn a “missed opportunity for labor.”

Leading ISO member Jesse Sharkey took over the leadership of the 23,000-member union last month after president Karen Lewis stepped down for health reasons. In 2012, Sharkey collaborated with Lewis and the union’s Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE) to shut down and sell out the strike by Chicago teachers, which threatened to develop into a political confrontation with the Obama administration and its corporate-backed “school reform” agenda. (See: “Lessons of the Chicago Teachers Strike”)

After the defeat of the strike, Emanuel closed 50 schools and wiped out more than 2,000 teachers’ jobs. As a reward for betraying the strike, one of the largest charter school operators, a key Emanuel ally, agreed to allow a CTU-affiliated union to organize—i.e., collect dues—from low-paid charter employees.

In justifying the union’s capitulation to Emanuel, Sharkey argued that not everything could be won in a strike. Instead, school closures and the attack on teachers, he declared, would be resolved in “a political struggle to come.”

The backing of Garcia underscores the real meaning of this “political struggle.” It has consisted of nothing more than maneuvers within the trade union and Democratic Party establishment over the best way to defend the institutional and financial interests of the union apparatus and suppress working class opposition to the Democrats’ austerity program.

Before the CTU endorsed Garcia, CTU President Karen Lewis spent months floating the idea that she would run against Emanuel. The ISO provided the essential cover for Lewis, a self-described Democrat who they palmed off as an intransigent defender of the working class and “leader of a

strike that challenged the business and political powerbrokers.”

While Lewis dropped out last month after revealing that she was undergoing treatment for cancer, the uncertainty surrounding her candidacy was bound up with sharp divisions within the trade union and Democratic Party establishment in Chicago.

A substantial section of the union apparatus is allied with Emanuel. This includes the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which has all but endorsed the current mayor, and the Teamsters and building trades unions, which have combined to give Emanuel more than \$1 million since the beginning of the year.

Other unions—including the CTU’s parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers—backed a potential Lewis campaign, no doubt fearing that Emanuel’s nakedly pro-business policies were further discrediting the Democratic Party and creating conditions for a social explosion that the unions might not be able to contain as they did during the teachers strike. Such an “independent” campaign, or at least the threat of one, was seen as a means of persuading Emanuel to adopt a less confrontational approach towards the unions and to use their services to suppress popular opposition.

In the end, Lewis dropped out, and, without so much as waiting for the required vote from the CTU House of Delegates, issued a videotaped endorsement for Garcia at the union’s Legislators-Educators Appreciation dinner on October 31. Introducing Garcia as the “next mayor of Chicago” and officiating over this sordid affair, which also included Governor Quinn, Jesse Jackson and AFT President Randi Weingarten, was Sharkey, who was photographed sharing a laugh with the governor.

In a CTU press release on the endorsement, Sharkey gushed, “Chuy will crack down on violent crime and violence against our children, and root out waste and abuse in Chicago’s government so we can start investing in essential services like public safety, schools, and putting Chicagoans to work rebuilding our infrastructure.” Further on, Sharkey added, Garcia “will also be a powerful voice in Springfield as we continue our fight for an elected representative school board, smaller class sizes and equitable school funding. Garcia will bring our city together and make it better for all of Chicago.”

These statements highlight the utterly conformist and pro-capitalist character of the ISO. Whatever its periodic references to socialism, left-wing politics, etc., the ISO functions as a faction of the bourgeois political establishment. It does not speak for the working class, but a privileged section of the upper-middle class, which has made, or is seeking to make, careers in the trade union

apparatus, academia and within the state itself.

Sharkey’s support for the dispatch of more cops in city neighborhoods is particularly striking. For all of his organization’s claims to oppose police brutality, the ISO leader endorses the call for expanding the operations of the notorious Chicago Police Department while backing a candidate who will escalate the budget-cutting assault on working class children and their families.

Even though Emanuel is expected to soundly defeat Garcia in next year’s election, the CTU endorsement serves a definite purpose. The CTU and its ISO backers are heavily invested in the promotion of identity politics, and Garcia is well suited for this role. Starting his political career as a city council ally of Harold Washington—elected in 1983 as the city’s first African American mayor—Garcia has long represented sections of Hispanic and other minority-owned businesses looking for a bigger share of city contracts and other business opportunities.

The dismantling and privatization of public education and other city services is opening up many such lucrative opportunities, including for the business executives who run the CTU and the rest of the trade unions. The demand for an end to the system of appointed school board members is bound up with this. As ample experience around the country has shown, elected school authorities, far from providing democratic control, have imposed no less savage budget cuts than mayoral appointees. But the prospect of such an elected board increases the influence of the unions and other business operations over the allocation of school contracts and other public resources.

What brings Emanuel, Garcia, the CTU and the ISO together is their common hostility to the working class. They fear that the explosive growth of social inequality and the further discrediting of the Democrats and unions are creating the conditions for the emergence of a genuine political movement of the working class that threatens the capitalist system they all defend.



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