

Chicago mayoral race enters final weeks

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On February 24, the city of Chicago will hold elections for mayor and city council. The campaigns of five candidates—the incumbent Rahm Emanuel, Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, Alderman Bob Fioretti, Rainbow/PUSH alumnus William “Dock” Walls, and businessman Willie Wilson—are being conducted amid general economic stagnation and widespread disgust with the Democratic Party, which has ruled Chicago for the last 80 years.

The main issues being debated in the campaigns include tax revenues and municipal debt (used by successive administrations to press for deeper cuts), persistent unemployment, and the upcoming contract negotiations with Chicago Public Schools teachers.

Though Emanuel is favored to win re-election, he is widely hated by working people in the city and cannot leave the election to chance. Emanuel’s campaign had by mid-January amassed nearly \$30 million in campaign funds he can share with the campaigns of his allies in city council races. The mayor is also making a number of special public appearances at transit stations during morning commutes.

President Barack Obama has endorsed Emanuel in a radio advertisement, in which he praises Emanuel’s policies, in particular his work to privatize the public education system, saying, “If you want a mayor who does what’s right, not just what’s popular, who fights night and day for the city we love, then I hope you’ll join me.”

Noting that the city of Chicago has not experienced economic recovery, Emanuel has in recent weeks emphasized his record of “structural reforms” to city spending and debt through cuts, promising to press on with those efforts.

This election has been met with indifference from the majority of working people in Chicago. Not only do none of the challengers to Emanuel—all Democrats—represent the interests of working people,

none of the candidates pretend to present any kind of “left” or even reformist program.

Emanuel enjoys political and financial support from many unions representing city workers, including the Chicago Firefighters Local 2, and Laborers District Council of Chicago & Vicinity. In the last four years, the laborers locals have worked with Emanuel to implement pay cuts for new hires and increase worker “flexibility,” in return for access to projects funded by planned hikes to water and sewage costs over the next several years.

Emanuel has also been endorsed by one SEIU local, while others have remained neutral. Another SEIU local representing health care workers has backed Garcia, and donated \$250,000 to his campaign.

The CORE faction leading the Chicago Teachers Union, including vice president Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization, have contented themselves with backing Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, long-time Democratic party machine candidate with a record of losing to other Democratic machine candidates.

Garcia has been a fixture in city and state Democratic party politics since the 1980s. Once a part of former mayor Harold Washington’s city council coalition, Garcia currently serves as a county clerk, and as Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle’s floor leader on the County Commission.

In that capacity, Garcia has supported layoffs of thousands of county workers and over \$400 million in budget cuts, including \$120 million from the county public health system, raising the retirement age for county workers, and diminishing county worker pension payments.

The fear of social unrest has been a central topic of candidate campaign statements and debates. Garcia and Walls have directed their campaigns largely to the Hispanic and African American communities,

respectively, but with the same message as Emanuel. They have emphasized the need for increasing police presence and community policing initiatives in order to try to establish better public relations between the population and one of the most notoriously corrupt and violent police forces in the United States.

In the first debate among the candidates last week, Garcia expressed grave concern over the lack of trust between police and the population after two police murders set off mass protests in the later months of 2014.

He said, “I will keep the promise the mayor [Emanuel] made by engaging in a four-point public safety plan that includes community policing. Community policing has been forgotten for many years ... One thousand new police officers—men and women—is critical to making neighborhoods safe.”

In late 2014, CTU vice president Sharkey spoke in support of Garcia’s law and order proposals. The ISO member said, “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.” (See “ Chicago Teachers Union backs long-time Democratic Party politician for mayor ”)

Garcia was eventually endorsed by the Chicago Teachers Union after some CTU delegates contested the decision of the union’s president, Karen Lewis, to make a public endorsement of the candidate prior to any discussion.

The so-called “progressive” faction of the Chicago Democratic Party is raising the issue of an elected school board in an attempt to siphon off enough votes to Garcia and Fioretti to perhaps force a runoff. If none of the candidates wins an absolute majority February 24, the election is to be decided in a second vote April 7.

The campaign for an elected school board was stepped up after the defeat of the 2012 Chicago teachers strike, as part of the CTU’s efforts to diffuse the anger of both teachers and parents into safer channels ahead of Emanuel’s closing of 50 schools in 2013. As part of initial efforts to expand privately-run charter schools and close public schools, state legislators gave the mayor of Chicago power to appoint the members of the school board in 1995.

The unions like the CTU that claim to oppose Emanuel’s policies support candidates who have already effected, or will effect, deep cuts to workers in the city and county. This is proof these organizations do not really oppose cuts. They only seek a mayor who includes them in the process of imposing the cuts and protects their bureaucratic positions and six-figure incomes.

The Illinois Education Association, affiliated to the National Education Association (NEA), representing 5,000 area educators mainly in the city colleges, endorsed both Garcia and Fioretti. The American Federation of Teachers and Amalgamated Transit Union locals have also endorsed Garcia. The AFT PAC Chicagoans United for Economic Security has spent more than \$250,000 in January 2015 to oppose Emanuel.



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