

Amid low voter turnout

Chicago mayor forced into runoff election

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26 February 2015

In the Chicago municipal elections February 24, Democratic mayor and former Obama administration official Rahm Emanuel failed to win the more than 50 percent of votes needed to avoid a runoff on April 7.

Despite the intervention of President Obama into the mayoral race at a publicity event last week, Emanuel earned just 45 percent of the vote, compared to 34 percent for Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia.

Three candidates ran well behind Emanuel and Garcia, taking roughly 21 percent of the vote. Of that, 12 percent went to millionaire businessman Willie Wilson, who is African American. He sought votes from city Republicans, openly supporting the new Republican Governor Bruce Rauner, who has launched a frontal assault on Illinois workers, particularly public employees.

The election was a political debacle for both Emanuel and Obama as popular support for the Democratic Party continues to drop amid expanded wars, deepening recession, continued austerity and rising levels of police violence.

Even more than the vote for Garcia, a long-time Democratic Party hack, mass abstention expressed the hostility of Chicago working people to the whole political structure. Voter turnout fell to an abysmal 34 percent, only slightly higher than the 2007 record low of 33 percent, when Mayor Richard M. Daley was reelected for a sixth term against token opposition.

The remarkably low voter turnout reflects widespread political alienation and opposition to the Democratic Party in Chicago, which has ruled the city for more than 80 years. The candidates who ran against Emanuel postured as political alternatives, but did not put forward any significant policy differences.

The elections took place on the same day an exposé

was published on the Chicago police department’s secret prison detention center, or “black site,” where prisoners have been held without legal representation, and tortured and killed by police. (See, “Chicago Police Department operates “black site” interrogation compound”)

The enormous social anger at Emanuel’s policies, largely continuing those of his predecessor, Richard M. Daley—including the closure of 50 elementary schools and multiple public mental health clinics, the denial of the basic needs of the working class for jobs, affordable housing, quality health care and education and public transportation—cannot and does not find any expression in the city’s perfunctory election rituals.

To the extent that there are divisions in the Chicago political establishment, this reflects concerns that Emanuel’s arrogant personality and thinly-veiled hostility to the working class reveals too much about the real social relations in the city, and the lack of democracy that exists in the US more broadly.

This concern found expression in the Garcia campaign, which focused in part on associating Garcia with an earlier era in Chicago politics, the tenure of Harold Washington, the city’s first and only African American mayor, in office from 1983 to 1987. On this thirty-year-old association—and not on Garcia’s current record of supporting cuts to pensions and health benefits on the Cook County board—his campaign will aim to curry favor with African American and Hispanic voters against Emanuel in the April run-off election.

Chicago Teachers Union vice president Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization, discussed the CTU’s support for Garcia with *Chicago* magazine Wednesday morning, saying, “Garcia will be the next mayor. Politics in Chicago has changed forever ... The CTU

played an important role in getting Chuy to run.”

Not only did CTU leaders play a part in Garcia’s candidacy, support for him was pushed through the CTU’s house of delegates via a video endorsement by union president Karen Lewis, released ahead of any discussion on who the union would endorse. (See, “Chicago Teachers Union backs long-time Democratic party politician for mayor”)

Sharkey went on to say, “As the Democratic Party has governed to the right and taken on tax cuts for the wealthy and public coffers shrink, there’s a big space that has opened up to the left and candidates are saying, “My opponents are corporate Democrats.”

Sharkey is already working hard to bolster illusions in bourgeois politics, by insisting that the corrupt, sclerotic and frankly criminal political establishment can in some meaningful sense be pushed to the left.

“The reason that imperial leaders like Rahm, or George W., or the Daleys could get away with so much is not because people liked what they were doing,” he claimed. “It’s because they don’t think they can do anything about it. Once the little idea sinks in, that’s when you have 26,000 on the streets around the CTU strike; that’s when Harold Washington gets elected.”

Sharkey’s comments demonstrate the real attitude of groups like the ISO, which represent a privileged layer of the middle class. They support the Democratic Party by promoting illusions in the existence of “non-corporate” Democrats, while covering up the fundamental class nature of this big business party and all its representatives.



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