

Democrats, pseudo-left groups maneuver in lead-up to Chicago mayoral runoff

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With two weeks to go until the April 7 runoff election for Mayor of Chicago, the two Democratic Party candidates—incumbent Rahm Emanuel and challenger Jesús “Chuy” García—are seeking to obscure the anti-working class agenda to which both are committed.

The first round of the elections, held on February 24, revealed the disgust felt by broad layers of the population for the Democratic Party and the entire political system. Only 34 percent of the electorate turned up to vote.

The fact that Emanuel, a former investment banker who served as President Barack Obama’s chief of staff, failed to win an outright majority—a first for an incumbent mayor in Chicago—was a reflection of mass hostility to the right-wing, pro-business policies he has pursued during his first term. This came in spite of a multimillion-dollar campaign fund and a last-minute endorsement from the president.

Within the Democratic Party and its affiliated organizations—particularly the trade union bureaucracy—there is concern that the party is broadly despised, not only in Chicago but nationwide. This has enormous implications, both for the Democrats themselves and for the stability of the US political system as a whole.

Enter “Chuy” García, who came in second in the February 24 election, with 34 percent of the vote. A section of the Democratic Party, along with the unions and the various organizations that orbit around them, are attempting to sell García as an “anti-establishment” Democrat.

García is, in fact, a thoroughly establishment figure in the Illinois Democratic Party, having recently helped push through over \$400 million in cuts and lay off thousands of workers in his position as Cook County Commissioner.

In the first one-on-one debate leading up to the runoff election, García paired his empty and demagogic criticism of Emanuel’s connections to the superrich with an attack

from the right on Emanuel’s fiscal record, stating, “Four years ago, the mayor promised to put the city’s fiscal house in order. That hasn’t happened. That’s why we’re in this financial hole that we’re in today.”

García insisted that it was necessary to tell Chicagoans the truth before explaining the “difficult choices” that will be required. Asked if he would reopen schools that had been closed, he said that “we have a difficult financial situation,” only adding that it was necessary to have “transparency.”

While García has provided as few details as possible about his intended policies, what he has said makes clear that he would only deepen the brutal austerity policies of his predecessor. One of the first proposals he announced was a plan to hire 1,000 more police officers, even as reports of endemic illegal detentions and police torture in Chicago continue to emerge.

When asked how he would fund a looming \$550 million payment to police and firefighters’ pensions, García said he would wait until after his election to consult with a panel of “experts.” In a preliminary financial plan released last Friday, he said that he would order “performance audits” of every city department in order to slash costs.

Finally, García said that he would be open to working with the unions to increase employee contributions to pensions and reduce workers’ benefits, saying, “I do not support cutting benefits for current city employees until we have a dialogue.”

García is backed by layers of the upper-middle class, including small business owners and trade union bureaucrats, who want a greater share of the bonanza of wealth Emanuel has delivered to Chicago’s financial district.

The unions in particular hope that García will work more closely with them in enforcing cuts on the working class, while helping to contain opposition among workers

within the framework of the Democratic Party. Among the unions that have endorsed him is the Service Employees International Union, a strong backer of Barack Obama. The SEIU is reportedly preparing to spend \$2 million to support García and has already run a television ad that contrasts the residential areas of the city and García to the downtown business districts and Emanuel.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), however, has been the principal force behind García's campaign, reportedly asking him to run and endorsing him after CTU President Karen Lewis, who had been expected to run against Emanuel, withdrew to undergo cancer treatment. In 2012, the CTU under Lewis's leadership worked to sabotage the strike by Chicago teachers, opening the door for Emanuel to intensify the attack on public education, including the shutting down of 50 schools.

The role of the CTU in backing García underscores the nexus between the Democratic Party, the unions and the International Socialist Organization, whose member, Jesse Sharkey, is the CTU's vice president and a close ally of Lewis. Sharkey noted in a recent interview with the *Chicago Magazine*, "The CTU played an important role in getting Chuy to run. Chuy had been advising Karen Lewis on her run. We thought he was viable as soon as it was clear Karen couldn't run."

Sharkey said on the day of the first round of the election, "My day started at 5:30 a.m. I was outside walking precincts, leafleting public transportation. I was outside for 11 hours, and then went over to Alhambra Palace for Chuy's victory party. I hugged him."

The ISO has, literally in this case, embraced the Democratic Party.

The central role of Sharkey in promoting "Chuy" is something of a political embarrassment for the ISO, since it clearly exposes the organization as nothing more than an auxiliary agent of the Democratic Party.

Sharkey and the CTU's promotion of García has been so shameless that *Socialist Worker* has been forced to posture as critical of García's campaign, while simultaneously suggesting that he could still be "pushed" to the left once in office.

In a March 5 article, the ISO attempts first to create an illusion of broad popular support for García's campaign, stating that at an election rally, "People on disability, retired teachers and veteran community activists greeted García with cheers and voiced their hopes that he'd break the corporate grip on Chicago politics." The ISO then tries to cover its back with tepid criticisms of García's thoroughly right-wing record, before concluding that

"progressives" like García are seeking to "moderate" the Democratic Party's neo-liberal policies.

Remarkably, while citing Sharkey's support for García, the ISO didn't bother to mention that the CTU vice president is actually a member of their organization.

Even the mild criticisms in the *Socialist Worker* article, however, were too much for some supporters of the ISO, as one reader in Chicago wrote, "Politics is a long-term game [sic] of moves and countermoves. Chuy is obviously not perfect. Yes, once he comes into office, we are going to have to push him, from the left, to address the Black Lives Matter movement more. Yes, he might try to make cuts as well. No, he is not socialist Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant. But that *does not exist* right now in Chicago."

These tactical differences within the ISO revolve around a common political strategy, however—that of maintaining the political domination of the Democratic Party at all costs. In this task, the ISO is joined by the likes of Socialist Alternative, among many others. Kshama Sawant, a leading member of Socialist Alternative, has been working closely with the Democrats since she was elected to the Seattle City Council in 2013.

Socialist Alternative declared in a recent edition of its paper that a victory for "Chuy" would "represent a serious defeat for the pro-corporate right wing of the national Democratic Party." Sawant herself attended the birthday fundraiser of a local leader of the Democratic Party in Seattle earlier this month, stating that the politician, Larry Gossett, "has been the ally of working people for a long time. He still stands for us."

In fact, there is not a "pro-corporate" and an "anti-corporate" wing of the Democratic Party. There is the Democratic Party, an organization of, by and for corporate and financial aristocracy. And Sawant and the ISO are little more than its political agents.



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