

Final debate of Chicago mayoral runoff shows agreement on budget cutting

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The final debate between Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his challenger in the upcoming April 7 runoff election, Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, a Cook County commissioner, took place Tuesday. The race is being watched closely nationwide as the two pro-corporate Democratic politicians vie for control of the country’s third-largest city.

On the day before the debate, a *Chicago Tribune* poll reported that Emanuel had opened up a 28 percent lead over Garcia, with 58 percent supporting the mayor, 30 percent supporting Garcia and 9 percent reporting being undecided. These figures confirm that Garcia has been unable to capitalize on the widespread working-class hostility to Emanuel because he offers essentially the same program.

The final debate centered on the city’s financial situation, which has been the subject of national attention, especially in the wake of the Detroit bankruptcy. Recent efforts to cut constitutionally mandated pension payments have included credit rating downgrades to drive both pension and budget cuts, negotiating clawbacks from non-retired city workers, and most recently, extralegal political maneuvers.

Regarding revenue increases, Emanuel proposed a “progressive sales tax,” to include services. He explained, “The sales tax we have today is scaled for 30 years ago. Services don’t count.” He also spoke in favor of a city-owned casino.

Each candidate attacked the other’s political record. Garcia laid blame on Emanuel for contributing to the 2007-08 global financial meltdown based on his term at scandal-ridden Freddie Mac. Emanuel attacked Garcia on his record in the Illinois government, having voted for the pension holidays that resulted in the enormous deficits workers now face. Both agree of course that “tough choices” need to be made.

Chicago Tonight host Phil Ponce attempted to moderate the debate as the candidates bickered with one another and attempted to score cheap debaters’ points in a discussion whose intellectual and political level went from bad to worse.

At one point, Ponce stooped very low—even by the standard of Chicago politics—to repeatedly question Garcia about his son’s allegedly criminal past. Ponce asked, “Is he still a gang member?” Garcia responded, “No. He is the father of four children... He has turned his life around.” Emanuel did not miss the opportunity, interrupting to note that he did not agree with Ponce’s line of questioning, at which point the City Club audience erupted in applause. As Ponce continued to pursue the issue of Garcia’s son, the audience began to boo.

Garcia has continually attacked Emanuel’s policies from the right, slamming his failure to hire 1,000 additional police officers and insisting that public safety is his central concern. Citing the pro-business Civic Federation’s criticism of Emanuel’s public schools budget as a “gimmick,” Garcia promised that he would root out the waste, fraud and inefficiency in the Chicago city budget, and do it “collaboratively.”

Emphasizing the identity politics of the Hispanic and black upper-middle-class layer for whom he speaks, Garcia said, “Chicago can’t move forward unless all communities get equity. There have been barriers that have kept groups out of the mix in terms of employment, in terms of contracts, and in terms of promotions. Partly this is due to machine politics, and also in part to structural racism.”

Emanuel boasted of the support he enjoys among some city worker unions like UNITE HERE, and the building trades and laborers unions, and the ease with which he has been able to negotiate contracts with city

workers including major cuts to pensions.

Garcia's campaign is for the most part a product of the Chicago Teachers Union and the Service Employees International Union working with a faction of the Democrats and Democratic-allied community groups like Grassroots Illinois Action, to produce the front organization United Working Families.

In boasting of their union support, both candidates relied on a basic fiction: that the unions represent the interests of the working class. The CTU and the SEIU are not acting in the interests of the working class in supporting Garcia. They are marshaling the political response of a section of the bourgeoisie to the revived militancy in the American working class and the dangers posed to bourgeois rule by the strikes of teachers and oil refinery workers, among others.

The antidemocratic nature of the election itself is evident in the enormous amounts of money being spent. In the weeks leading up to the runoff, Emanuel's millions in campaign funds have been the subject of national attention. However, both candidates have continued to receive substantial campaign contributions. State campaign finance records indicate Emanuel's campaign reported receiving \$1.24 million in recent days, including \$100,000 from packaging magnate Melvin Berlin and \$50,000 from Hollywood television producer Dick Wolf, who has filmed a number of disaster and crime dramas in Chicago in recent years, including *Chicago Fire* and *Chicago PD*.

Garcia's campaign reported taking in more than \$520,000, including \$500,180 from the political action committee of the SEIU Illinois.

Both candidates have sought to raise money locally, as well as in New York City and Los Angeles. Garcia was hosted in New York City by the United Federation of Teachers, where American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten led the proceedings.

Weingarten addressed the City Club of Chicago Wednesday to promise that when he cuts the budget, Garcia will likely bring the unions on board, since he "understands that when it comes to making tough choices, communities are not our enemy—they need to be our partners."

Senator Bernie Sanders, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats, is also expected to speak in the area this week on behalf of Garcia and a CTU-backed candidate for alderwoman, Sue Sadlowski

Garza.



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