

Chicago mayoral election rally

“Chuy” Garcia, Bernie Sanders promote trade unions, Democratic Party

Marcus Day, George Marlowe
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A who's who of trade union bureaucrats, ex-radicals and “progressive” bourgeois politicians assembled on Chicago's South Side Thursday night in an attempt to shore up flagging support for the Democratic Party.

The election rally was held in the final days before the city's runoff vote on April 7. The event was nominally to promote the campaign of Sue Sadlowski Garza, a district supervisor for the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and candidate for city council.

Joining her was mayoral candidate Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, who is challenging incumbent Rahm Emanuel. US Senator Bernie Sanders, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats, was also in attendance, as was Karen Lewis, president of the CTU. John Nichols, writer for the liberal *Nation* magazine, served as master of ceremonies.

After seven years of the Obama administration and its unending program of austerity, attacks on democratic rights and war, masses of workers and young people are growing increasingly disillusioned with the Democratic Party. This found expression in the near-record low voter turnout of 34 percent in the first round of the Chicago elections in February. Emanuel, who is widely hated for his attacks on public education and workers' pensions, received only 45 percent of the vote, despite a multimillion dollar campaign fund and an endorsement from the president.

Under these conditions, a section of the Democrats, along with the trade unions and the pseudo-left, are attempting to revive illusions that there is a liberal wing of this bourgeois party which is capable of enacting progressive social reform.

Demagogy ruled the evening, as the speakers sought to pose as defenders of the working class in front of an audience primarily composed of union functionaries and ex-radicals. Not one of them uttered the name of Obama, or even hinted at the role of his administration in being the chief representative of the ruling class.

Indeed, each of the speakers has been directly complicit in the attacks on workers' living standards, as is demonstrated

by an examination of their records.

John Nichols, the MC, has long served as one of the most craven apologists for the Democrats, playing a crucial role in boosting the unions and channeling the mass protests against Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker in 2011 behind a recall election. Nichols set the tone at Thursday night's rally, first calling on the audience to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance, then declaring, “I love that we have people here of every race, religion and class gathered on the southeast side of Chicago.”

The dead-end politics of nationalism and class collaboration were to emerge as the common themes throughout all the speakers' remarks.

Karen Lewis, who is undergoing cancer treatment and had to be helped from the stage after she spoke, summed up the perspective of the upper-middle class layers for which she speaks: “I don't care who's mayor. If the rich people want to run Chicago, don't think for a moment that's not going to happen. But if you have the opportunity to really talk to them, how can we move them? *Not* miles, *not* kilometers, but a foot here, an inch there. Things will change.”

As head of the CTU, Lewis was principally responsible—along with leading International Socialist Organization member and CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey—for the defeat of the 2012 Chicago teachers strike. After shutting down the strike and forcing through what Lewis herself referred to as an “austerity contract,” Mayor Emanuel was given a free hand to close over 50 schools and lay off thousands of teachers.

The next speaker, Sue Sadlowski Garza, a member of the CTU's leading Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), to which Lewis and Sharkey both belong, sought to associate herself with a previous era, referring to her family's association with the steelworkers and Chicago's South Side. In the 1970s, Garza's father, Ed Sadlowski, Sr., was the director of District 31 of the United Steelworkers (USW) and ran as a reform candidate for the union's leadership.

Both Garza and Nichols spoke in reverent terms about the USW, even as BP oil refinery workers on strike in nearby Whiting, Indiana remain completely isolated and betrayed by a sellout agreement reached at the national level. Indeed, if a significant working class presence was lacking at this rally, it is because workers have been betrayed by trade union politics for decades.

Scott Marshall, a USW representative from District 7, tried to explain the absence of oil workers from the event, by stating, “Hopefully, we will hear from the strikers later. We asked them to be here. But they are in the middle of a very difficult situation.”

The site of the rally itself, the former union hall of USW Local 1033, is worth examining as a concentrated expression of the rise and fall of trade unionism in America.

The local emerged out of the semi-insurgent efforts of workers to unionize in the 1930s, frequently in the face of the combined violence of the capitalists and their state apparatus. This culminated in the Chicago area in the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937, in which police fired on unarmed striking workers at Republic Steel, killing ten and injuring dozens more.

In the 1980s, Republic Steel was bought out by LTV Corporation, which subsequently declared bankruptcy and closed its Chicago factory in 2001. The USW did nothing to defend the workers there or at numerous other closing mills in the surrounding area, and today the former steelworkers union hall is a church.

Later in the evening, Nichols introduced Garcia, pointing to the key role played by the CTU in promoting his campaign: “I don’t think Chuy would object to the notion that the woman that cleared the space for *this* mayoral race is the president of the Chicago Teacher’s Union, Karen Lewis!”

Garcia postured as a populist friend of working people at the event, cynically suggesting that figures such as Sadlowski and himself treat “working people with the highest dignity” and put “their interests first.” As the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported previously, Garcia himself has long been part of the Democratic Party establishment and carried out the demands of the ruling elite for austerity, most recently pushing through over \$400 million in cuts while serving as Cook County Commissioner.

In facing off against Emanuel, he has sought to posture as a “left,” while indicating to the financial elite of the city that he is better suited to carry out the attacks they require against the working class. Garcia mouthed empty and insincere criticisms of Emanuel’s connections with Chicago’s super-rich, stating, “We don’t need no politicians that kowtow to the millionaires and the billionaires.”

In his financial plan for “fiscal sustainability,” however,

he outlines a program of drastic cuts to city programs and departments—as well as threats of a municipal bankruptcy—criticizing Emanuel for his “poor financial management practice of accumulating long-term debt to pay off annual department expenses.”

The final speaker supporting Garcia and Sadlowski Garza, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, was in Chicago as part of a fundraising tour in advance of a possible presidential run. On Friday he was scheduled to host a private breakfast with a “suggested donation” of \$1,000 per person.

Belying his supposed opposition to the “big-money” politicians, Sanders told *Crain’s Chicago Business*, “I am not going to Chicago to attack Rahm Emanuel. I’ve known him for many years.”

While quoting several statistics about the growth of social inequality in the US, Sanders remained absolutely silent on questions of war and the record of the Democratic Party.

Instead, he promoted the poisonous nationalism which has long served to divide workers, stating: “We are going to fight for new trade policies in America! Not NAFTA, not CAFTA, not Trans-Pacific.

“Every day on TV, we see corporations say, ‘Buy this product, buy that product!’ If they want us to buy their products, how about they produce them in the United States of America!”

Finally, in an indication of the real nervousness in the political establishment over growing popular discontent, Sanders said, “Brothers and sisters, what is happening here is truly of national significance. Workers are working longer hours for lower wages. They’re worried about their kids, they’re worried about their parents. They’re saying ‘Hey, Government doesn’t represent me! You don’t represent my family! They represent the rich and the powerful. The government is an oligarchy. They own it, I quit!’ But what you are saying here is that you are not giving up easily.”

There is a chasm which separates the working class from all of the figures assembled at Thursday’s rally: the trade union officials, the upper middle class liberals, the pseudo-lefts. It is only in establishing its political independence in opposition to all of these forces, which serve as defenders of the capitalist order, that any of workers’ social needs can be met.



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