

Chicago Democrats prepare new attacks on public education

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As the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the Democratic administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel continue negotiations for a new contract covering 30,000 teachers and other school employees, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), has been forced to step down from her \$250,000 per year position after being targeted by a federal corruption probe. The resignation takes place amid increasingly vocal demands in the media for financial takeover of the school district and as authorities continue to expand privately run charter operations.

The primary justification for a new round of deep cuts is the claim that CPS faces an unsustainable “fiscal crisis” involving an estimated operating deficit reported of about \$1 billion, and billions more in unfunded teacher pension obligations.

The financial shortfall is the product of decades of deliberate policy decisions, including corporate tax cuts, federal and state education cuts, the diversion of public school money to politically connected charter operators and insufficient state and municipal contributions to pension funds. Nevertheless, the media and sections of the political establishment have used the manufactured crisis to demand the imposition of a financial dictator with sweeping powers to slash teacher pensions and further dismantle the public school system.

A May 22 *Chicago Tribune* board editorial approvingly cited the comments of a financial hatchet man who said successful restructurings require a “specialist” armed with powers like Italian fascist ruler Benito Mussolini.

“CPS desperately needs a turnaround specialist,” the *Tribune* wrote. “It needs deft financial management. The people hired to take on corporate salvation projects have to have ‘Mussolini-like powers to execute and implement,’ turnaround expert Bill Brandt of Development Specialists Inc. tells us. ‘If not, then that person is set up to fail.’ A successful turnaround CEO for

the school system will need the full backing of the mayor and full authority to make decisions, regardless of political blowback.”

The Emanuel administration and CPS officials have steadfastly claimed there is no money to improve the wages and benefits of teachers, much less carry out the significant investments needed for staff, and for the repair and improvement of cash-starved schools. Meanwhile, top school administrators diverted tens of millions of dollars to private contractors, according to the federal investigation.

CPS CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett formally resigned her position June 1 as a weeks-long investigation continued into the \$20.5 million no-bid contract awarded by the school district to SUPES, a school principal training agency and Byrd-Bennett’s former employer. Bennett is the sixth CEO to have led CPS since 2010. To date, SUPES is reported to have received \$12 million of the \$20.5 million from CPS.

A series of emails have come to light in the investigation showing SUPES head Gary Solomon to have had a long-standing relationship with the Emanuel administration, including involvement in the recruitment of Byrd-Bennett’s predecessor Jean-Claude Brizard, who left in 2012 in the immediate aftermath of the teachers strike that year. Solomon is reported to have played a key role in securing Byrd-Bennett’s position in CPS.

The SUPES relationship with CPS has been underwritten by the Chicago Public Education Fund, a “philanthropic” foundation funded and operated by some of the area’s wealthiest individuals. These include Illinois current Republican governor Bruce Rauner, President Obama’s Commerce Secretary and Hyatt Hotel heiress Penny Pritzker, and Citadel’s multi-billionaire hedge fund manager Ken Griffin.

CPS Board Vice President Jesse Ruiz, an attorney serving the financial services industry, is currently interim

CEO.

In a written statement to teachers rejecting the CTU's recent request for a meager three percent pay raise, Ruiz made the city's allegedly underfunded pensions a central issue in the contract. "In the coming weeks, we hope to work with you on the most pressing fiscal issue facing CPS—the continued inequity in pension funding. CPS students and Chicago taxpayers continue to carry the burden of this inequity, and it has come at a great cost. In the coming weeks, we hope you will join us in Springfield on working to reform this inequity."

A recent Supreme Court ruling struck down, at least temporarily, the Illinois legislature's attempt to cut the pensions of public sector workers in violation of the state constitution. This has only opened up discussions on the myriad opportunities for budget cutting at state and municipal levels, including throwing Chicago or the Chicago school district into bankruptcy. US judges in the Detroit and Stockton, California bankruptcy cases have already ruled that federal bankruptcy laws trump state constitutional protections for public sector workers' pensions.

The CTU, which is allied with the Democratic Party, has proven its unwillingness and incapacity to defend teachers and public education. The CTU leadership includes various members of pseudo-left organizations, including CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). The CTU shut down the 2012 teachers strike in order to prevent it from developing into a political confrontation with the Obama administration, which has spearheaded corporate-backed "school reform" and the attack on teachers. This paved the way for the closing of 50 public schools and the layoff of thousands of Chicago teachers, as well as the escalation of anti-public education attacks across the US.

In the recent mayoral election, the CTU backed a machine Democrat against Emanuel, only to claim later, after he won re-election, that the thuggish big business politician had been chastened by the tougher-than-expected mayoral race.

"Rahm in 2011 is not Rahm in 2015," Jesse Sharkey told teachers after his reelection. "He really had to get off his high horse to win. And I think that, as his campaign has shown, there are ways he can act less imperious that can make his life easier."

Since winning the runoff in April, however, Obama's former chief of staff has escalated his offensive against public education. In a recent interview, he told the *Atlanta*

Daily World that he ran again "so that I can get the education system right..." Having closed less than half of the 129 schools he targeted for closure in early 2013, one can only assume that getting "education right" will mean attending to his unfinished business.

The WSWs warned teachers and other public sector workers that Emanuel's re-election would only open a period of aggressive cuts to pensions and social services. At the same time, the CTU is seeking to dampen the expectations of teachers whose contracts expire June 30 by echoing the official lie that there are not enough resources for improvements in wages and classroom conditions.

"Money is not our membership's biggest concern right now," Sharkey declared last month, adding, "If the district has no money to put a counselor in a school where a half-dozen kids get shot, or not enough money to have the counselor who's there actually counsel, then they don't have the money for a three percent raise, do they?"

On May 27, the Board of Education voted to approve a charter school's expansion onto the premises of one of the 50 schools closed by Emanuel in 2013. The school closures were supposedly due to under-enrollment, and at the time, city officials pledged not to transfer decommissioned schools to charter school developers.

The district authorized seven new charters in January of this year alone. CPS spokesman Bill McCaffrey said the district is prepared to move charter schools into the shuttered neighborhood schools if "a community were to determine that they do want a charter school in that closed site." The school district currently pays charter schools housed in private facilities a \$750 per student fee.

The school district recently announced the smallest capital budget in 20 years—\$160 million, about one third of last year's budget. While starving the schools of necessary funds, Emanuel continues to provide tax breaks to major corporate interests like Boeing and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.



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