

Chicago teachers march against pay cuts

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With just one week left in the school year and three weeks before the June 30 expiration of the three-year contract covering 30,000 teachers in the city's public schools, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) called a downtown rally and march Tuesday evening. An estimated two thousand were present, including teachers, city bus drivers and other workers.

The rally exposed the enormous chasm between the determination of teachers and other sections of the working class to improve their living standards and defend the right to public education, and the CTU and other unions, which are allied with the Democratic Party and active partners in the attack on teachers and education. Among the speakers promoted by the CTU at Tuesday's rally was Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, a long-time Democratic Party hack known for supporting austerity measures.

The speakers demagogically attacked Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner and other state Republicans while remaining silent on the role of President Obama, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and other Democrats who have starved public education of funding in order cut corporate taxes and expand charter school operations. At the same time, the speakers at the rally sought to dampen the expectations of teachers by repeating the lie that the district is in a financial crisis.

The CTU had not put forward any concrete demands in ongoing contract negotiations even as the school district maintains its call for a seven percent pay cut and a three percent increase in out-of-pocket health care contributions. Additional proposals from the city reportedly include freezes on teacher incentives based on seniority and training, known as steps and lanes, which are structured into educator salaries.

Speaking at the City Club of Chicago, Alderman Patrick O'Connor made it clear city officials are using a largely manufactured crisis over supposedly unfunded public worker pensions to demand ever greater sacrifices from school employees: "[Y]ou can't negotiate a contract if you don't know how much money you have in the bank. You can't negotiate a contract if you don't know what the pension fund payment will look like. You can't negotiate a contract if you have the choice between making your pension plan or

paying your teacher to open the school."

While there is widespread support among teachers for a struggle, the CTU is determined to prevent another strike having almost lost control of the last one. In 2012, the union shut down the walkout before it developed into a direct confrontation with Emanuel and the Obama administration. This was followed by the closing of 50 schools and the layoff of thousands of teachers.

In promoting Tuesday's rally, CTU said it was "the single most important thing we will do this school year to fight for a good contract." Union vice president and leading member of the International Socialist Organization Jesse Sharkey has said in recent days a strike vote is not forthcoming and any potential action would have to wait many months because of the district's budgetary crisis. He has also said teachers cannot expect wage increases under conditions in which the district didn't have money to operate.

Sharkey ran the rally on Tuesday, introducing CTU delegate and recently elected Chicago Alderwoman Sue Sadlowski-Garza, CTU President Karen Lewis and Garcia. The CTU backed Garcia's mayoral campaign earlier this year to gain leverage in its dealings with Emanuel.

In his remarks, Sharkey focused his criticisms on well-known Republicans, saying, "[T]he schools are stripped for everything of value. The halls are dirty and the classrooms are unclean because Ken Griffin and Bruce Rauner and their billionaire friends don't want to pay their taxes."

Sharkey made it clear the union was not unreasonable and would not make any overly costly demands. "We are making demands for librarians, for every school to have a nurse on every day of the week, where counselors are allowed to counsel and teachers are allowed to teach, not just administer standardized tests. And now you know not all those things cost money, but some of those things cost some money."

Well aware of the deep discontent among teachers over the immense levels of social inequality in the city produced by decades of pro-business policies by the Democratic Party, CTU President Karen Lewis made demagogic remarks about "taxing the rich." Lewis asked the crowd, "Who are the one set of people that could solve this problem by doing one

thing? Paying their fair share.”

Since 2011, the pseudo-left leadership of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) faction of the CTU has promoted such proposals as taxing financial transactions, which would presumably be carried out by the Democratic Party-controlled city administration. Another proposal, backed by the Service Employees International Union, would call on Mayor Emanuel, a former investment banker, to take an “activist” approach to the banks by ending city contracts with those that refuse to negotiate more favorable terms.

Such proposals, which Lewis, Sharkey & Co. all know have the proverbial snowball’s chance in hell to be adopted, are aimed at boosting illusions in the Democratic Party and blocking the development of a political opposition by teachers and broader sections of the working class against the two big business parties and the capitalist system they defend. The unions and the various pseudo-left groups who are gaining positions in city government are not opposed to austerity. Like their counterparts in Syriza in Greece, they are only seeking a “seat at the table” to ensure that the upper middle class elements they speak for get a share of the spoils.

This includes gaining the support of the Emanuel administration to unionize and collect dues from miserably paid charter school teachers even as city officials shut public schools and lay off hundreds, if not thousands, of CPS teachers. Lewis recently championed a vote in support of unionization at a large three-school charter operator in the city, Urban Prep.

The CTU and other city unions are now in negotiations with Emanuel to impose a new round of cost-cutting measures in the schools and other city services. The alternative, the unions claim, are even more draconian measures from Governor Rauner.

In a recent article, the *Chicago Tribune* noted Emanuel will continue to rely on the unions to implement his agenda, and “lean on their expertise in making money-saving cuts while “fram[ing] himself as an inclusive leader who seeks input from the working Chicagoans whose lives will be affected by additional pension reforms, work rule changes or service cuts.”

Just last week, Emanuel held a closed-door meeting with representatives of the Chicago Federation of Labor on new cuts and potential sources of revenue, after which Chicago Federation of Labor President Jorge Ramirez said, “The commitment to this collaborative process is being reinforced, and exacerbated, really, by what's happening to the economy.”

In sharp contrast to the treachery of the unions, teachers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* at the rally

expressed determination to fight and solidarity with other workers facing cuts. One teacher declared, “We should all go on strike. The working class is not something to mess with.”

Kwame, a teacher on the south side, said the cuts in education “really let you know where the priorities of our politicians are. They say there’s no money, but it’s a misallocation. The banks get what they want. But we don’t have any money for our classrooms. They are spending money on defense, on war, and there’s no shortage of money for that.

“It’s sad, you know, cause we’re raising citizens. All they’re doing is taking money out of the schools. They’re taking money out, and we have less and less resources. We don’t have books anymore; they don’t want to order books most years.

“All they want to do is privatize education. Charter school teachers have to work longer hours and get paid less. These teachers burn out quick. Good luck finding a teacher to work in that atmosphere.”

Sandra, who currently teaches in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, said, “Every teacher works extra hard and extra hours without pay. We think that it is unfair that people who are making the decisions are not teachers. Teachers should be in charge and making the decisions.”

“I think it’s ridiculous that they want us to take a 10 percent pay cut,” a teacher in the Bronzeville neighborhood said. “We are here to defend education. The one percent has everything and they want to make it worse for us. It’s injustice. They have money for the wealthy and education is not a priority. I have 30 children in my classroom, but there’s no way you can learn and keep teaching children in this environment.”

Assessing the 2012 strike and the conditions she faces, she added, “On paper the strike was a victory. But in reality things have gotten worse. They closed schools. Our school is a disaster. We have to share a nurse with other schools. With such inequality in our country, in our schools, who doesn’t want real equality? The people that benefit from inequality are the rich. They get all the privileges.”



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