

Chicago teachers' union blocks fight against layoffs, offers to impose pay freeze

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The contract covering about 28,000 teachers and paraprofessionals in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system expires at midnight July 1. Negotiations between the district and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) for a one-year contract continue as Mayor Rahm Emanuel works with the Democratic-led legislature and Republican Governor Bruce Rauner to implement austerity measures to cover the district's \$1 billion budget shortfall and hundreds of millions in pension payments.

On Tuesday night, Emanuel's handpicked school board approved a plan to pay the \$634 million owed to the teachers' pension fund by borrowing \$1 billion. School officials said they would pay for the loans by eliminating the jobs of 1,400 teachers beginning Wednesday and other cuts.

"As an immediate consequence of driving the district further into debt and our need to address the existing structural deficit—which is also driven by decades of pension neglect—CPS will make \$200 million in cuts. As we have said, CPS could not make the payment and keep cuts away from the classroom, so while school will start on time, our classrooms will be impacted."

Union officials claim they were "blind-sided" by the layoff announcement. This is false. School officials previously floated plans to cut as many as 3,000 jobs in addition to some \$250 million in school cuts. The layoffs are on top of the thousands of job cuts CTU accepted after it betrayed the 2012 teachers strike and opened the way for Emanuel to close 50 public schools.

The funding crisis is chiefly the result of corporate tax cuts and incentives to the financial industry, as well as "pension holidays," which amounted to politicians taking interest-free loans against worker pensions for city operations. Forced to turn to the bond markets after decades of federal, state and city budget cuts, debt

servicing already accounts for \$300 million of the CPS budget. This will only increase now.

While CTU President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey acknowledge the crisis is "manufactured" and the district is "broke on purpose" they have joined the Democrats and Republicans in telling teachers that there is no money for pay raises or improvements in the public schools.

At a June 25 press conference CTU president Karen Lewis said, "We understand that there is a serious financial problem and we are willing to work within that framework. We accept that there will be a 0 percent raise. But give us something to make that 0 percent feel better."

In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Sharkey, who is a leading member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, made it clear the "something" the union was looking for to help sell the wage freeze and other concessions to its membership would be cost-free and largely cosmetic.

"We want to reduce paperwork, we want to assert teachers' autonomy over grading, we want to reduce standardized testing and we want to make the evaluation system less punitive. None of them cost a dime," Sharkey told the *Tribune*. "We would be willing to agree to a [pay] freeze if you could give us something concrete in these areas."

On June 29, Sharkey again defended the district's claims, telling WGN's Download radio program, "When we say 'broke on purpose,' both parts are important, including the recognition that CPS is broke. We don't think it's a good time to be asking for big raises or really expensive reforms."

As for issues like standardized testing and staffing levels, these are not even part of contract negotiations, according to a 2011 state law endorsed by the CTU and

state teacher unions. Senate Bill 7, which brought in the unions as partners in corporate-backed “school reform,” excluded negotiations over supposed non-economic issues while expanding the use of standardized tests to scapegoat and fire teachers for problems caused by decades of budget cuts, layoffs and the growth of poverty among the state’s school children.

In an effort to provide a political cover for its collaboration in the attack on teachers and public education Sharkey urged teachers to appeal to the state legislature to consider “progressive” tax measures, including ending the state’s flat income tax, to increase revenue for the schools. This is under conditions in which there is a bipartisan consensus—from the Obama White House, to the state and local levels—to provide endless tax cuts and incentives to big business and to open up the multi-billion dollar “education market” to corporate interests.

The union’s collaboration with the Emanuel administration is further exposure of all of those pseudo-left forces such as the ISO and Solidarity, which claimed that the CTU and its Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) were the model for reviving the unions on the basis of “social justice unionism.” Hostile to the struggle for the political independence of the working class and socialism, these forces speak for layers of the upper middle class, including union bureaucrats and black and Hispanic entrepreneurs, seeking their own cut from the dismantling and privatization of public education.

Lewis, Sharkey & Co. sold out the 2012 strike just at the point in which it threatened to become a direct political confrontation with the Obama administration and the Democrats, with whom they are allied. The CTU is preventing a strike now because it fears such a struggle could become the catalyst for a far broader mobilization of the working class against the Democrats under conditions in which workers have suffered from the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression, even as corporate profits and the stock markets hit record highs.

Such a confrontation, however, is absolutely necessary. The fight to defend and vastly improve public education and every other social right of the working class is above all a political struggle over what class will control and distribute the wealth created by

labor of working people. The unions defend the capitalist system and are violently opposed to any movement of the working class that threatens their relations with the corporate and political elites.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party has consistently fought for teachers to break with the CTU and create new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the ranks and based on an entirely different political outlook and strategy. A radical redistribution of society’s wealth will not be achieved by appealing to the Democrats and Republicans, but only through building a mass political movement to fight for workers’ power and socialism.



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