

“Lay us off now,” Chicago Teachers Union official says

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The Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third-largest school district in the United States, hosted public hearings on the district’s budget on August 18. Hundreds of parents and teachers expressed their anger at continued cuts to neighborhood schools and described the effects these would have on teaching and learning conditions.

CPS announced a proposed budget that slashes an additional 479 positions on top of an already-announced 1,400 layoffs, and cuts \$200 million in spending. The proposed budget is currently \$480 million short, and additional cuts and layoffs are expected. Special education programs are expected to be hardest hit, with an estimated 200 positions eliminated district-wide. While neighborhood schools will be hit with \$60 million in cuts, charter schools are to receive a \$30 million increase in funding.

If anyone expected the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) to oppose the cuts and layoffs they would have been sadly mistaken. Speaking at the end of the hearing on the north side, CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization, gave advice to CPS officials on how best to wipe out teachers’ jobs.

Referring to potential layoffs of more teachers in the midst of the school year if the \$480 million budget gap is not resolved, Sharkey expressed his preference for immediate layoffs, saying, “If you lay us off now, we can look for new jobs. If you let us go in the middle of the year, that’s our livelihood.”

Sharkey’s comment is only the latest confirmation of the right-wing character of the ISO, which is little more than an adjunct of the Democratic Party. The organization, which has nothing whatsoever to do with socialism, accepts without question the necessity for austerity, teacher layoffs and other anti-working class

attacks. In his position in the leadership of the CTU, Sharkey functions as every other union bureaucrat, enforcing the dictates of big business and the capitalist political establishment.

The CTU are facilitating Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s plans to downsize the district. Sharkey and other officials have repeated the lie that there is no money and blocked a strike by the district’s 28,000 teachers when their labor agreement expired on June 30. Since then they have diligently worked to lower teacher expectations over wages and benefit improvements.

During the 2012 strike and in the years afterwards, CTU president Karen Lewis and vice president Sharkey presented Emanuel as the arch-villain in order to posture as opponents of his attacks on teachers and school privatization policies. However, they have long since mended fences with the mayor.

In an interview earlier this month with Chicago magazine, Lewis stressed her now cozy relationship with the Democratic mayor. “I think that my relationship with Rahm is better,” Lewis told the magazine. “I can just run [my ideas] up the flagpole by Rahm. And he has been very open.”

Lewis went on to claim that Emanuel was really the victim of the Republican governor Bruce Rauner, elected in November 2014, who forced the mayor into doing things he really didn’t want to do: “I think part of the problem we had last time is that Rahm had an agenda that was pushed by other people, including [Gov. Bruce] Rauner, that I don’t know if Rahm even truly believed in. A lot of it was kind of like, ‘Put the union in their place and dah dah dah.’ The elephant in the room is the budget and not having any money. So then it becomes a matter of what your priorities are, what your vision is. And I think we have yet to see that, but I think [Rahm’s] thinking about it.”

In other words, Emanuel has seen the light: it is far better to use the services of the CTU to lay off teachers and destroy public education than to try to circumvent it and provoke a rebellion by the teachers that Lewis, Sharkey & Co. might not be able to control.

These developments are yet another damning indictment of all those who held up the CTU as proof that the trade unions could be reformed and turned into fighting instruments for the working class. Behind all the claims about “social justice unionism” were the aspirations of upper middle class pseudo-leftists who see the unions as the path to lucrative careers and to acquire their own cut of the spoils from the dismantling of public education, other social services and pensions.

Sharkey and Lewis shut down the 2012 teachers strike just at the point when it threatened to develop into a broader struggle against the Obama administration, which has spearheaded the attack on public education. The CTU signed a deal that accepted the sweeping attacks on teachers’ rights and paved the way for the shutdown of 50 schools and the layoffs of thousands of teachers in 2013. In return for selling out the strike, the unions were given the opportunity to “organize” teachers (that is, collect union dues) at one of the city’s largest charter schools, operated by a close political ally of Emanuel.

Last week, the CTU agreed to the district’s demand to bring in a mediator for a new labor agreement. The district wants the teachers to contribute more to their health care plans—in line with Obama’s punitive Cadillac Tax on supposedly overly-generous medical coverage. It also wants teachers to pay nine percent of their salaries into pensions and to accept stricter classroom evaluation criteria. The change to the pension funding alone is estimated to amount to a seven percent pay cut.



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