Ahead of plans for 5,000 layoffs

ISO-led Chicago Teachers Union aligns itself with mayor against teachers

Kristina Betinis
27 October 2015

Three years after selling out the nine-day strike by 26,000 Chicago teachers against the city administration of former Obama White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has openly allied itself with Mayor Emanuel.

The betrayal of the 2012 teachers' strike opened the way to the closure of 50 schools, widespread teacher layoffs and cuts in educational programs. Now Emanuel is preparing even more devastating attacks on public education and the teachers.

In September, the CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Forrest Claypool, threatened to lay off 5,000 teachers and other school workers should the state of Illinois fail to help the school district plug a $480 million gap in its operating budget. The school district's plan would result in wage cuts, the shutdown of after-school programs, increased class sizes and the consolidation of students from different grades into single classrooms, all in the middle of the current school year.

Already this year, more than 1,400 teachers and other school workers have been laid off. The city has shaved $200 million from its public schools budget, primarily impacting special education students.

The Republican governor of Illinois, Bruce Rauner, a billionaire investment banker, has offered to advance the city $500 million to plug the operating budget gap on the proviso that additional "reforms" be enacted, including the termination of school district contributions to teachers' pensions.

In August, CPS announced the end of the practice called pension "pick up." CPS had "picked up," or paid, 7 of the 9 percent of pay that teachers contribute toward their pensions. This practice is the result of an agreement made by the CTU in the 1980s in exchange for accepting lower pay raises in subsequent years. In September, CPS proposed to end contributions to the pensions of non-union office workers, other district employees and non-union support staff by 2018.

In addition to the proposed increase in teachers' pension contributions, an effective 7 percent wage cut, Emanuel is reportedly demanding that teachers pay more for their health benefits.

Public-sector pensions have come under bipartisan attack in Illinois, with Democrats and Republicans offering competing proposals for cutting constitutionally-protected retirement benefits and raising the retirement age. Pension cut proposals aimed at state and city workers have moved through the legislature with the support of leading Democrats. These initial attempts have been struck down by the courts, but new attacks on pensions are being prepared.

Mayor Emanuel recently explained the importance of collaborating with the unions in imposing austerity. Speaking to the *Sun-Times* on how he has won agreement from the AFL-CIO when each successive year of his administration has involved more layoffs and fewer city workers, he said, "Asking organized labor to be part of the solution is a better way of getting to a result than saying that organized labor is the problem… It stands in contrast to what's not happening in Springfield [the state capital]."

This praise for the role of the AFL-CIO in attacking city workers applies equally to the CTU. Emanuel's statement sums up his relationship not only with the AFL-CIO, but also with the teachers union and its ISO leadership.

Under the leadership of CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the ISO, the teachers have been without a contract since June 30. Already last year, the CTU signaled its readiness to discuss "modifications," i.e., cuts, to teachers' pensions. Sharkey and the rest of the union leadership allowed the previous contract to expire without making any preparations for a strike and leaving no doubt that they were desperate to avoid a walkout. Uncritically accepting the budget framework presented by the school district, the city and the state, they made clear that they would make no wage demands.

CTU President Karen Lewis boasted that the union was on better terms with Emanuel following his reelection in April of this year and stressed that the union was committed to tailoring its demands to the restraints imposed by the budget crisis.

It was capitulation all down the line. But far from appeasing Emanuel and Rauner, the prostration of the CTU encouraged them to escalate their assault on the teachers.

Sharkey has led the union's groveling. He trumpeted the fact

© World Socialist Web Site

that the CTU was asking only for a one-year contract extension, and stressed that in addition to helping impose a wage freeze and pension concessions on the teachers, the union would limit its demands to “cost-free” items such as a reduction in teacher paperwork and the initiation of violence-prevention programs.

In an appearance on the “Chicago Tonight” television program, Sharkey casually referred to CPS plans for several thousand layoffs prior to their having been announced. This was an attempt to intimidate teachers and suppress rank-and-file resistance.

“Not a lot of progress going on right now at the table,” he said. “Contract negotiations don’t like uncertainty, and there’s a tremendous amount of uncertainty about the whole school year. I mean, we think there could be 5,000-7,000 layoffs and steep cuts in teacher pay and just an evisceration of a lot of programs unless there’s help from Springfield [the state capital].”

Following Claypool’s September 14 announcement of his plan for 5,000 or more layoffs, Sharkey said, “The math that he’s using is fairly secure, airtight. It’s a number that we’ve been using for months now.” He added, “It’s a gloomy assessment, but if we can’t figure out a way to tax the wealthy, we are going to see our schools fall off a cliff.”

At an August 18 hearing on the school district budget, Sharkey accepted the destruction of teachers’ jobs as a given and advised the city to avoid delay and lay off teachers immediately.

Sharkey’s statements and actions in relation to the contract are indistinguishable from those of any garden variety union sellout artist, from American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka on down. This is the ISO and the entire fraternity of middle class pseudo-left organizations in action. Behind the “left” and even “revolutionary” rhetoric, these forces speak for privileged social layers—including the trade union bureaucracy—that are deeply hostile to the interests of the working class.

They function as agents of the Democratic Party, seeking to provide a “left” cover and a broader constituency for this party of Wall Street and the military/intelligence apparatus. The tools of their trade are identity politics, with questions of race, gender and sexual orientation employed to cover up the fundamental class divide in capitalist society and foster divisions within the working class. In Sharkey’s line-up with Emanuel, himself a multi-millionaire former investment banker, is summed up the real relationship of the ISO to the American ruling class.

The ISO-led CTU has transitioned from posing as an opponent of Mayor Emanuel to openly allying with him, ostensibly against the Republican governor and state legislators. The CTU-ISO’s opposition to Emanuel during the 2012 teachers’ strike was itself two-faced. The union leadership, including Sharkey, continued to support the Obama administration, whose election the ISO had hailed.

The CTU and Sharkey worked in tandem with Emanuel, the American Federation of Teachers and the AFL-CIO to isolate the teachers and get them back to work based on a sellout contract that eased the layoff process, eroded seniority and increased the use of test scores to evaluate teachers. They acted to prevent the teachers’ struggle from mobilizing broader support in the working class and exposing the role of the entire Democratic Party.

CTU leaders cynically declared the shutdown of the strike and the sellout contract a “victory,” and the ISO continues to present the CTU as a model of “progressive” trade unionism, ignoring the catastrophic consequences for teachers and students of the school closures, layoffs and cuts that followed the strike’s betrayal.

The next step by Sharkey and the CTU was the organization of a political diversion in the form of the union’s promotion of the mayoral campaign of Jesus “Chuy” Garcia. This long-time Democratic machine politician was presented as a “progressive” Democratic alternative to Emanuel. The purpose of the campaign was to prevent workers from drawing the necessary political conclusions from their bitter experiences with both the Obama and Emanuel administrations and grasping the need to break from the Democratic Party and build an independent political movement.

It is now clear that the Garcia campaign was a transition to an open alliance with Emanuel. After Garcia’s defeat in a runoff against Emanuel this spring, the CTU began to “repackage” Emanuel as a changed man and a positive alternative to the state Republicans. The so-called “socialist” Sharkey told the *New York Times*, “Rahm in 2011 is not Rahm in 2015. He really had to get off his high horse to win.”

After Emanuel won reelection, the WSWS warned that in the midst of economic downturn and absent a unifying political struggle of workers against both parties of big business, Emanuel would broaden his attack on the working class. This warning was made in opposition to the claims made by the CTU that Emanuel had been “chastened” by the mayoral campaign and runoff. (See: “Chicago Democrats prepare new attacks on public education”)

The lesson that must be drawn by teachers and workers in all sectors is that the fight against the assault on living standards by the government and big business requires a fight against the ISO and all other pseudo-left defenders of the Democratic Party, the trade union bureaucracy and the capitalist status quo.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site