Chicago Teachers Union holds mock strike vote as it prepares to back massive cuts

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The city of Chicago is launching an unprecedented attack on public school teachers, including the threat of mass layoffs, a multi-year pay freeze, increases in pension and health care costs and stricter administrative discipline for teachers.

With Illinois now in the fourth month of an impasse between Democrats and Republicans over the state budget, 5,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers are threatened with being laid off by Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel if the city does not receive an estimated $480 million from the state to cover a budget gap.

In the face of these threats, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) held a "mock strike vote" on November 5. Teachers who reported that they expected to vote to authorize a strike were instead given "practice" ballots. Many turned to social media to express their frustration and anger at the ludicrous "practice" poll.

The CTU has been in negotiations with the Emanuel administration since the spring, and about 28,000 teachers have been working without a contract since June 30. Last year, CTU President Karen Lewis said she would accept "modifications" to the pensions of active teachers. This year, CTU leaders have repeatedly emphasized that they accept the budget crisis framework presented by the city and the state, promising to make no wage demands in the negotiations. This capitulation has only emboldened Emanuel to claw back gains teachers won over previous decades.

The *World Socialist Web Site* obtained a copy of the summary of the school board's demands that was distributed to teachers by the CTU last month. The summary revealed both the ruthlessness of the Emanuel administration and the prostration of the CTU.

According to the summary, the CPS Board of Education is proposing the following concessions in a three-year contract:

* Zero percent pay raises in the first and second years, and a 1.5 percent raise in the third year.

* No pay raises related to advanced education credentials or seniority ("lanes" and "steps").

* Teachers are to be responsible for paying 7 percent of salary into their pension funds over three years. Previously teachers contributed 2 percent, with the remainder paid by the school board in exchange for lower pay raises in subsequent years.

* $50 million in health care premium increases over three years.

The school board has also reportedly proposed increasing school administration authority over teachers and restrictions on their democratic rights in the workplace, including:

* Eliminating teachers' ability to mediate or arbitrate disciplinary actions taken against them by school administration.

* Eliminating teachers' ability to appeal their ratings, used to prioritize teachers for tenure, advancement or layoff.

The school board has reportedly rejected a number of the CTU's "cost-free" proposals made in the effort to cover its collaboration with the city. These include reduced paperwork; limits on standardized testing; increased autonomy in grading and lesson planning; limits on privatization, including the use of subcontractors and expansion of charter schools; a legal approach to recouping money lost to banks through swaps schemes; class size limits; full staffing of teacher aides; and counselors to address "high levels of violence in the city."

From the start of the negotiations this year, the CTU has cozied up to the Emanuel administration and has sought to prevent any fight against the attack on

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teachers, including by proposing a one-year contract extension, accepting a pay freeze, creating “cost-free” contract demands and offering pension “modifications.”

These moves follow the CTU’s sabotage of the 2012 teachers strike, which the union shut down as quickly as possible on the terms dictated by the Emanuel administration. The strike was followed by the closure of 50 schools and mass layoffs of teachers.

So terrified is the CTU of the possibility that the widespread anger of teachers could escape its control, the union is seeking to avoid even holding a strike authorization vote. CTU spokeswoman Stephanie Gadlin told the *Chicago Tribune* Monday, “No decision has been made as to when or if that vote will occur.”

The terrific scale of the attacks being prepared is due entirely to the capitulation and cowardice of the CTU, which has boasted of the modesty of its goals in the contract negotiations this year. Their plan has from the start been to avoid another strike while increasing the union’s collaboration with the Emanuel administration and the Democrats at the state level.

Both Emanuel and his appointed schools CEO have taken to the media to cynically encourage parents and teachers to lobby state representatives on the budget issue to divert attention from their own roles in preparing layoffs, program cuts and school consolidations at the beginning of 2016. In making the political appeal, CPS chief executive Forrest Claypool called the cuts and layoffs he was prepared to enact “unprecedented.”

CTU President Karen Lewis has stepped in to advise the city administration to renegotiate debt terms with the banks to lower the city’s ballooning interest payments and thus relieve pressure on city revenues, which have been impacted by a series of credit rating downgrades.

At the CTU’s annual fundraiser benefiting its political action committee, Lewis appealed directly to leading Democrats present, including Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan and Senate President John Cullerton, who are currently at loggerheads with the Republican governor on how precisely to enact state budget cuts. In her comments, Lewis referred to the union’s previous collaboration with state legislators. This collaboration included the passage of a 2011 landmark anti-teacher “ reform” bill.

“There’s so many areas that we have been able to influence legislatively,” she said, “but we couldn’t do it without some of the people in this room.”

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