

Thousands of Chicago teachers rally to defend jobs

A WSWS reporting team
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Thousands of teachers, working without a contract for nearly five months, rallied in downtown Chicago Monday evening to oppose a new round of attacks on their jobs and living standards. The rally was called by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which sought to conceal its own complicity in the assault on educators and to promote Democratic Party politicians as the friends of teachers.

The CTU held the rally under the slogan “One Vision. One Voice. One Victory,” in conjunction with local Democrats, trade union officials, religious leaders and pseudo-left protest organizations. The aim of the event was to contain the deep social tensions in the city—being driven to a boiling point by relentless austerity and horrific police violence—and to conceal the role of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, which has run the city on behalf of big business for 80 years.

Thousands of teachers and other workers came to hear how the CTU would respond to the threats made by the Emanuel administration to lay off 5,000 teachers—or about one fifth of the workforce—and consolidate schools, cut programming, slash wages and hike health care and pension costs. Since negotiations for a new labor agreement covering the city’s 25,000 public school teachers began last spring, the Democratic mayor has not backed down from his anti-worker demands (see, “Teachers union holds mock strike vote as it prepares to back massive cuts”).

While teachers were looking for a way forward, the CTU and its political supporters did everything at the rally to deaden the senses and prevent any serious discussion among workers. Advertised as a “holiday tailgate party,” it had all trappings of a casual backyard gathering. Yet it took place against a backdrop of illuminated skyscrapers, in the center of the country’s third-largest city, where workers are facing unprecedented attacks on their wages and conditions.

Teachers were given no information on the present state of the negotiations. Instead, Democratic Party representatives and leaders from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT), the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) were invited to grandstand and issue worthless pledges of support.

In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, teachers

expressed their determination to fight to defend their jobs, pay and conditions, which have sharply deteriorated due to the bipartisan school privatization efforts at the city, state and federal levels over the last 15 years.

One special education teacher told the WSWS, “I know one teacher who left Julian High School in Chicago who was making \$75,000 a year, and now she’s making \$55,000 at a high school outside the city. She did that because she just wanted to be safe and have a job. I have a lot of friends like that.

“It’s just two or three of us, and we got about 80 kids. Administrators just want results, and they don’t see what we’re doing. They don’t even come to check. We work like crazy. They’re working us to death.”

Opposition to the attack on teachers and public education as a whole erupted in the 2012 teachers’ strike in Chicago. The struggle was betrayed by the CTU in exchange for “organizing”—i.e., collecting union dues from lower-paid charter schoolteachers. In addition, the CTU established a closer working relationship with the Emanuel administration as it prepared to shutter 50 schools and lay off hundreds of teachers (see, “The betrayal of the Chicago teachers strike: one year on”).

While other union officials made a few demagogic criticisms of the billionaire Republican governor of Illinois, Bruce Rauner, and President Obama’s former chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, CTU leaders were notably silent on the role of the political establishment in leading the attacks on public education. Neither CTU President Karen Lewis nor Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), made a single mention of Emanuel, Rauner or Obama, who has led the attack on public education at the national level.

Sharkey’s comments were directed at demoralizing and intimidating teachers at the rally. In a city with 14 billionaires on Forbes’ list of richest Americans, Sharkey never challenged the demands by the Democratic city administration and the Republican governor that there was simply no money to pay for public education, pensions, etc.

Instead, he bent over backward to prove to the political establishment that the CTU’s demands were reasonable and

would not cost any money. “We also heard our members say we want some dignity and some respect on the job. These things don’t cost a lot,” Sharkey said, just “a little bit less paperwork, a little bit fewer tests. Some simple things.”

Sharkey acknowledged that all the pleadings had done nothing to budge the Board of Education, which remained intransigent. “Over a year ago, we began bargaining with the Board of Education. Five and a half months ago, our contract expired, and we were no closer to an agreement. Four and a half months, the Board withdrew all its proposals from the table. Two months ago, school began, still without a contract. And two months ago, the Board said no lanes, and no steps, and no respect for the people who work in schools.”

Taking a page from the United Auto Workers, which used the threat of an isolated and financially ruinous strike to intimidate workers, Sharkey said ominously, “We asked you to come out here in the cold for a reason. And that reason is we want to remind people in this crowd of what it takes. It takes some resolve. It means that you have to remember that you have no rights, you have no rights that they are...that they are obligated to respect, unless you can fight for it.... Sisters and brothers, you will have a chance very soon to answer the question of how much resolve you have. When you do that, answer will be yes.”

Interviewed by the *Sun-Times* immediately after the rally, Sharkey wouldn’t say when the CTU would call for a strike vote.

In addition to 75 percent strike approval from teachers, a 100-day fact-finding period is required before teachers could legally walk out. These restrictions were signed into law in 2011, after CTU and representatives from the national teachers’ unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Educators Association, worked with advocates of reactionary education “reform” advocates to craft the legislation.

Finally, CTU president Karen Lewis took the stage to declare, “No teacher wants to go on strike. Was it difficult for us in 2012? Yes. But we showed our solidarity, we showed our power, and we won things in our labor agreement that we needed to protect our interests. And we will do it again this time.”

For teachers to win any of their rights, they must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CTU and fight to mobilize the broadest sections of the working class against the Democratic Party and its austerity measures. Any strike controlled by the CTU would only be led to defeat again.

The sellout of the 2012 strike by the CTU paved the way for mass layoffs and firings, expanded testing for teacher evaluation, and made the closure of 50 schools and related layoffs much easier. During and after the strike, Lewis and Sharkey acknowledged the need for school closures but insisted Emanuel work with the CTU to carry them out in an orderly way.

More than three years after the betrayal of the strike and after

thousands more teachers have been laid off, the Emanuel administration is relying on the CTU to convince teachers to accept sweeping concessions once again. The CTU, after cozying up to Emanuel, is struggling to get even a few cosmetic “sweeteners” in order to sell a rotten deal to teachers.

Teachers who spoke to the WSWS at the rally expressed their frustration over the contract impasse and the lack of any information, let alone serious proposals, from the CTU. “I’m very anxious to see what happens,” one teacher said. “The contract expired in June, and nothing has happened since. It’s really frustrating. The conditions right now make for a really tense workplace. They are threatening to cut over 5,000 jobs. Classrooms are already really crowded. It’s just really hard not knowing what is going on with the budget, and it’s stressful. It sounds like we are going to strike. We were just at this point a few years ago.

“They are calling for a 7 percent pay cut for us. I don’t know anyone who would stay in a job like this and take such a big pay cut. It’s really closer to a 10 percent pay cut with health care costs. We have people running this city and making decisions without our voice. It’s not a democracy at all.

“I think we should get a pay raise. I would at the very least like to be making the same. Teachers should definitely be paid more. We have tax cuts for millionaires, but that’s money that can be put in schools. They have money for everything but education.”

Another teacher addressed Emanuel’s threat of 5,000 layoffs. “Our principal told one of our teachers that because of the budget situation, the younger teachers are on the chopping block. Multiple teachers may get let go at our schools, including PSRPs [Paraprofessionals and School-Related Personnel] and aides. Without them, things start falling apart. Teachers will have to do a lot of the work that PSRPs do, including helping out special needs children, making more copies ourselves and more.”

Speaking on the rally, she noted, “Honestly, I thought this rally was just a lot of catch phrases and I didn’t really hear anything meaningful for us. We came out here in the cold. We were given no information apart from a list of union speakers. I would have liked to have gotten real information.”



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