

Chicago teachers vote to authorize strike action

Kristina Betinis
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Determined to defend their jobs and public education, 96.5 percent of public teachers in Chicago, Illinois voted to authorize strike action, according to an announcement by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) Monday. About 92 percent of teachers cast ballots in the vote held over the weekend, meaning at least 88 percent of all teachers in the CTU support a strike.

The vote took place amid what the city claims is a \$480 million budget shortfall. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Forrest Claypool has declared that if the state of Illinois does not help the city plug the budget gap, 5,000 teachers will be laid off and funding to schools will be slashed, resulting in school consolidations and programming cuts. More than 1,000 teachers have already received layoff notices this year.

While teachers have repeatedly demonstrated their determination to fight, the CTU, which includes members of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO) in leading posts, is opposed to any struggle against the Democratic Party and corporate and financial interests demanding school cuts and austerity. The CTU has kept teachers working without a contract since June as it works out the best way to suppress and derail mass opposition.

The Democratic Party in Chicago, led by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, is determined to make the working class pay for a budget crisis largely caused by decades of corporate tax cuts and the entanglement of the city and school district in financial speculation and punishing debt servicing burdens. Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff, is also aggressively pursuing school privatization efforts and punitive "accountability" schemes to attack the jobs and living standards of public school teachers.

CTU President Karen Lewis has boasted that the union is now on good terms with Emanuel following

his reelection in April of this year. The mayor is currently embroiled in a political crisis stemming from his administration's systematic cover up of police murders in the city. Lewis has stressed that the CTU is committed to tailoring its demands to the restraints imposed by the budget crisis.

In announcing the vote total, CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey—a member of the ISO—said, "Rahm Emanuel really does not need a teachers strike. And what we're telling him is if he doesn't listen to us, that's what he'll get. We're not going to take it lying down, these cuts. We're not going to treat it like a fait accompli that cuts are coming."

However in September this year, that's precisely what Sharkey said in response to Claypool's announcement of budget crisis-drive cuts, "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." In a video message last week ahead of the vote, Lewis addressed teachers and again emphasized the modesty of the union's demands, which include limiting paperwork and testing. She said, "These are cost-neutral. They do not cost the board a nickel."

She continued, "The board is dragging its feet in order to delay the process. The Board of Ed thinks that by doing so they can sideline CTU and allow the mayor and Springfield to make a budget without our input."

After decades of collaboration with the Democratic Party's budget cutting, in 2012 the newly-elected CTU leadership headed by Lewis called a strike by the city's 27,000 public school teachers. The walkout was quickly shut down before it developed into a confrontation with Emanuel and the Obama administration, which has spearheaded the attack on public education and teachers. The betrayal of the strike paved the way for the shut-down of 50 schools—the

largest mass school closing program in US history—and the laying off of 1,000 teachers.

Lewis made it clear from the beginning that the CTU was not opposed to the school closings but only wanted to be consulted in the process. Behind the scenes, the CTU suppressed working class opposition and characterized the school closings as “racist” as part of the campaign to support Democratic Party politicians and businessmen looking to get a piece of the action from the privatization of the public school system.

Shortly afterwards, it was announced that the largest charter school operator in the city, a close political ally of Emanuel, had agreed to sanction the unionization of his employees by a CTU-aligned union.



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