

Chicago teachers union leader pledges to enforce austerity

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Negotiations between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel continue amid growing resistance from workers to austerity nationwide, including teachers in Detroit. In the face of this, the president of the CTU Karen Lewis insisted last week that teachers “understand” that they will have to make sacrifices.

A statewide budget crisis is being used to push cuts in virtually every quarter. Budget negotiations have been deadlocked in the state government for more than six months and state workers and Chicago teachers have been without contracts since the fiscal year ended on June 30.

Last Wednesday, Illinois Republicans announced plans for legislation allowing for the city of Chicago and its school district to declare bankruptcy. In making public his support for the provocative legislation, Republican Governor Bruce Rauner targeted teachers directly, declaring, “I believe if we get involved we can take on the teachers union.” But the threat of bankruptcy is only one of many weapons being used to attack workers’ right and living standards across Illinois.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has reported an estimated \$1 billion deficit and an operating budget shortfall of \$480 million. Last Friday, CPS announced it laid off 227 administrative workers in its central office, including its chief financial officer and head of media relations, and cut 180 vacant positions for a reported savings of \$45 million. No teacher layoffs were announced at that time.

In 2015, more than 1,400 teachers and other school workers were laid off as the city shaved \$200 million from its school budget. Democratic mayor and former Obama administration chief of staff Rahm Emanuel has in the course of negotiations with the CTU demanded

that teachers agree to a pay freeze, pay all of their own pension contributions—amounting to a pay cut of about seven percent—and accept increased costs for health care.

In displaying their willingness to push through the cuts, CTU leaders have echoed the bipartisan claims about the “severity” of the budget crisis and boasted of their new rapport with Emanuel since his election victory against CTU-backed Democrat Jesus “Chuy” Garcia in an April runoff.

CTU President Lewis said last week that negotiations with the Emanuel administration were going well, because teachers—who have been under relentless attack for more than 10 years under both Presidents Bush and Obama—understand that the budget crisis requires their sacrifice!

“We’re doing fairly well. Both sides understand that concessions have to be made.

“I think people understand what dire straits CPS [is in]. We’re going to lose certain things in this contract. Even pension pickup,” she said, referring to the city’s demand that teachers shoulder the entire cost of their pensions.

The CTU and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), are doing everything they can to suppress opposition from teachers, who are increasingly frustrated and angry with the conditions they are forced to work in, and to keep them under the political control and influence of the Democratic Party.

Two weeks ago, AFT President Randi Weingarten praised Lewis for leading a “successful strike” and “knowing who our enemies are,” referring to the Republican Party, at a January 14 meeting of angry Detroit teachers. This was aimed at corralling a wave of sick-outs organized by rank-and-file teachers independently of the union to oppose deplorable school

conditions and years of wage and benefit concessions backed by the AFT's Detroit affiliate. Meanwhile, AFT officials met with representatives of the Obama administration, in hopes of crushing the protests before the president visited Detroit on January 20. Instead, teachers shut down nearly the entire school system in the largest sick-out yet.

Far from leading a "successful strike," Lewis and CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, shut down the 2012 strike by Chicago teachers before it escalated into a full scale confrontation with the Obama administration, which has spearheaded the attack on public education in the name of corporate-backed "school reform." The betrayal of the strike opened the door for Emanuel to shut down 50 schools, layoff thousands of teachers and vastly expand charter schools. As a reward for their complicity, the CTU and the AFT were granted access to "organize," i.e., collect dues from low-paid charter teachers.

School privatization has enjoyed bipartisan support for decades, and the Democratic-controlled Illinois state government is the author of the debt crisis, which has funneled vast public resources to major financial institutions collecting high-interest payments on the debts.

Attacks on state workers have been portrayed by union leaders as solely a Republican initiative after hedge fund billionaire Republican Bruce Rauner was elected in November 2014. Before him, Democratic Governor Pat Quinn claimed his commitment to cutting pensions was why he "was put on this earth," reforms which were later judged by the Illinois Supreme Court as unconstitutional.

As advancing attacks on the working class are planned by both parties, the role of the trade union leaders and the so-called "lefts" in these organizations has been to present austerity as only a Republican conspiracy, to promote racial politics to keep workers divided, and maintain the domination of the Democrats over teachers and the working class more broadly.

There is immense opportunity for a united struggle of all sections of the working class in Illinois. Teachers in Chicago should follow the lead of teachers in Detroit, who are starting to take matters into their own hands and act independently of the teachers union. The defense of public education requires a unified struggle

of the working class against both big business parties and the profit system they defend.



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