

Chicago teachers face mass layoffs after bargaining committee rejects CTU-backed deal

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Officials from Chicago Public Schools on Tuesday announced plans to cut \$100 million in spending in a move that threatens the jobs of 1,000 teachers and other school employees if they do not bend to demands for sweeping wage and benefit concessions. The announcement followed the unanimous rejection of a deal proposed by the Chicago Teachers Union by its own 40-member bargaining team on Monday.

Saying that he was “disheartened” by the vote, schools CEO Forrest Claypool said at a press conference he had spoken to CTU President Karen Lewis and was committed to work with her to reach a deal.

Claypool said he had no choice but to make cuts that would “disproportionately affect staff” and would have to stop paying teachers’ share of pension contributions to the Illinois retirement system. Leaving no doubt these measures were aimed at blackmailing teachers into submission, Claypool said, “We would be thrilled to rescind it if we get a deal. We really believe the contract we’ve put into place is the foundation of an agreement.”

School officials and Mayor Rahm Emanuel were confident they had a deal with the CTU to impose deep concessions on 27,000 teachers and other staff. Last week, CTU President Karen Lewis called the deal a “serious offer,” adding that the “basic framework calls for economic concessions in exchange for enforceable protections of education quality and job security.”

The deal was so foul, however, that the bargaining committee was aware of the deep opposition of teachers and could not adopt it. According to media reports, the four-year contract offer would have had teachers shoulder the whole of their pension costs—amounting to

a seven percent pay cut—in exchange for raises of 2.75 percent next year and three percent for each subsequent year of the four-year contract. No other details on wages and benefits were released, although Emanuel has demanded teachers accept higher out-of-pocket expenses to cover their health care benefits, which will be subject to Obama’s “Cadillac Tax” in 2018. The offer reportedly included a pledge from the city to “limit” the expansion of charter schools.

With CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey—a leading member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization—at her side, Lewis and other officials described the district’s announced cuts as an “act of war.” Lewis announced lamely that the union intended to file unfair labor practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board.

For all their bluster, Lewis and Sharkey welcome the added pressure on teachers to accept the district’s demands. Since the expiration of the previous contract last June, the CTU has done everything to prevent a strike, which teachers overwhelmingly voted for, and to wear down opposition by insisting that teachers have no choice but to accept concessions because of the alleged financial crisis the district and the state of Illinois faces.

Members of the bargaining team said they rejected the deal because the promises about the city stopping charter expansion were totally unenforceable. The city’s pledge to temporarily halt the growth in the number of charter schools can be overridden by the state of Illinois at any time.

The CTU-backed deal, moreover, did not include any measures to resolve the revenue problems the district faces due to cuts, pension costs and enormous interest

payments to major financial institutions. Hundreds of millions in interest payments will again come due on the district's debt, which was downgraded to junk bond status in 2015.

Lewis, Sharkey & Co. are determined above all to suppress any struggle that would disrupt their relations with the Democratic Party, which while supporting drastic attacks on public education, generally prefers to carry them out with the support of unions, rather than circumventing them like the Republicans.

In 2012, the CTU sold out the strike by teachers in order to prevent a direct confrontation with Mayor Emanuel and the Obama administration, which has spearheaded corporate-backed "school reform" measures, including punitive test-based "accountability" schemes and the expansion of charter schools.

Following the defeat of the strike, Emanuel pressed ahead with the closing of 50 schools and the layoff of more than a thousand teachers. In return, a CTU-affiliated union was given access to "organize" low-wage teachers at one of the city's largest charter school operations.

During the 2012 strike and for two years after, Lewis and Sharkey portrayed Emanuel as a villain in order to posture as opponents of his attacks on teachers and school privatization policies. But this rhetorical opposition has long been dropped and the CTU leaders are now in an open alliance with Emanuel in the current budget and pension negotiations with Republican governor Bruce Rauner. (See, "ISO-led Chicago Teachers Union aligns itself with mayor against teachers")

Last week, Lewis declared, "Both sides understand that concessions have to be made." (See, "Chicago teachers union leader pledges to enforce austerity")

The problem for the CTU and the Emanuel administration, however, is that teachers are determined not only to stop further concessions but to recoup their losses and fight for a vast improvement in public education. This is part of a growing mood of opposition and militancy, which has also been expressed in the wave of sick-out protests by Detroit teachers conducted independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

Teachers have shown immense determination to fight, reflected in two mass demonstrations last year and in a 96 percent strike authorization. But teachers

cannot allow their fight to defend schools and jobs to be strangled by the CTU, which is allied to the Democratic Party and through it to the banks and corporations.

Rank-and-file teachers must take the conduct of the struggle in their own hands by building fighting committees, which are independent of the CTU, and focused on fighting to mobilize the broadest support in the working class to defend the right to public education. There is widespread sentiment in the working class for a united struggle against austerity but the fight must be a political struggle waged against the entire corporate-controlled political system: the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, and their adjuncts in the unions and so-called left groups propping them up.



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