

Mobilize the working class to defend public education in Chicago!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party

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This statement will be distributed at a demonstration of teachers being held today in Chicago, Illinois.

More than three years after the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) shut down a strike on terms dictated by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, teachers are once again facing a pitched battle against both big business parties and the CTU itself. At stake is not only the jobs and working conditions of teachers, but the very future of public education—in Chicago and throughout the country.

Earlier this week, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) announced plans for \$100 million in budget cuts, including a threat to lay off 1,000 teachers and other school employees and end contributions to the teachers' pension fund. Their demand: that teachers accept a new contract deal imposing steep increases in pension contributions and opening the way for the further privatization of public schools in the city.

In opposing this attack, teachers can win mass support in the working class as a whole. However, to carry out a struggle it is necessary for teachers to understand who are their friends and who are their enemies.

The CTU is now posturing as an opponent of the deal—the very same deal that CTU President Karen Lewis called last week a “serious offer.” Lewis earlier hailed the rotten agreement worked out behind closed doors, claiming that the “basic frameworks calls for economic concessions in exchange for enforceable protections of education quality and job security.” Now Lewis says that it is an “act of war.”

The maneuvering of Lewis, Vice President Jesse Sharkey and the rest of the CTU leadership is aimed at providing themselves with cover after their secret negotiations with Emanuel and the CPS were exposed. The CTU—which has left teachers to work without a

new contract since June—had intended to organize a vote of the bargaining committee before any details were released to teachers, then pressure teachers to accept it. However, aspects of the agreement were leaked to the media and publicized on social media, quickly provoking immense anger.

Concerned about the possibility of a rebellion if it backed the deal, the bargaining committee voted against the agreement, and Lewis and Sharkey modified their line. Teachers must be on guard, however: the CTU, in collaboration with the Emanuel administration, is preparing a new line of attack.

In a Tuesday interview on “Chicago Tonight”, Sharkey—a member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization—made the union's position very clear. Referring directly to the most provocative element of the rejected offer, the city's demand that teachers shoulder all of their own pension contributions, Sharkey said, “Everything is on the table.”

While they scheme with CPS and the Emanuel administration, the CTU is determined to prevent teachers from drawing the conclusion that in the fight to defend their interests and the institution of public education, they are engaged in struggle against the Democratic Party and the Obama administration, backed by the entire political establishment and the corporate elite in whose interests it serves.

In the more than seven years since the economic crash of 2008, the ruling class has overseen a vast redistribution of wealth. The richest 20 individuals in the country now control more assets than the bottom half of the population, or 152 million people. Trillions are allocated to finance bank bailouts and fund the Pentagon war machine, while basic social services are

under relentless assault. Anything that does not contribute to corporate profits or fuel Wall Street speculation is on the chopping block, and public education is a prime target.

Since coming to office, the Obama administration has intensified the assault on public education carried out by his predecessor, pushing for increased testing, an attack on teachers and the transformation of public schools into for-profit charter operations. Emanuel, his one-time chief of staff, is implementing this policy in Chicago.

The unions, including the American Federation of Teachers—with which the CTU is affiliated—have collaborated in this attack. Far from representing teachers, the AFT and CTU have worked with the Democrats in imposing pro-corporate education reform, only seeking to ensure that the unions have a seat at the table and a portion of the spoils.

In 2012, the CTU isolated the strike by teachers and prevented the enormous opposition from coming into confrontation with Emanuel and the Obama administration. Following the defeat of that strike, Emanuel advanced the attack on schools, closing 50 elementary schools and laying off more than 1,000 teachers. In return, a CTU-affiliated union was given access to “organize” lower-paid teachers at one of the city’s largest charter school operations.

A real struggle to defend public education must begin with an understanding that teachers face in the CTU an enemy no less bitter than Emanuel or Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner.

Teachers in Chicago can take a lesson from the Detroit teachers, who last month engaged in a round of sickouts in opposition to the disastrous state of public education in the city. These actions were taken independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, which is no less beholden to the interests of the ruling class and a political alliance with the Democrats than their counterparts in Chicago.

While Chicago teachers have many determined foes, they have even more powerful allies. These include teachers throughout the country who are facing the same attack, as well as all sections of the working class who have an interest in expanding access to public education, fully funding schools and opposing the dictates of the corporate-financial elite for continual wage and benefit cuts.

In Chicago, the Emanuel administration is deeply despised, overseeing unprecedented social inequality and a ruthlessly murderous police force. There is growing anger and opposition throughout the United States. Moreover, the conditions in the United States are replicated in country after country around the world.

To mobilize this opposition, teachers require their own organizations. The Socialist Equality Party calls for rank-and-file teachers to form fighting committees, independent of the CTU. A first task of such a committee would be to issue an appeal to the workers of Chicago for a common struggle in defense of public education.

The formation of such organizations is a critical and necessary step in mobilizing the entire working class in a fight against an economic system based on exploitation, poverty and war: capitalism.



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