

Detroit and Chicago teachers fight to defend public education

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The past month has seen the entry of thousands of teachers into open struggle against the attack on public education by the Obama administration and both the Democratic and Republican parties. After decades of relentless budget cutting, teacher layoffs and school closings—accelerated in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash—teachers in Detroit and Chicago have begun a battle that is of immense importance for the entire working class.

In fighting to defend the fundamental democratic right to a decent education, teachers have been thrust into a conflict with every section of the political establishment, from the two big business parties and the capitalist courts to the corporate-controlled media and the teachers' unions that falsely claim to defend their interests.

Last month, thousands of Detroit teachers conducted a series of “sick-out” protests that culminated in the shutdown of virtually the entire school system on January 20, the day of President Obama's visit to the city. The actions were initiated by rank-and-file teachers using social media and carried out independently of and in defiance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Teachers in the city named by Obama's former education secretary as “ground zero” for the administration's education policies demanded adequate resources and personnel to repair unheated and unsanitary school buildings, reduce class sizes, and provide social services to address alarming rates of poverty among their students. They also demanded a return of wages and benefits ceded by the DFT.

The efforts of the media and the state-appointed emergency manager of the school system to slander the teachers as greedy and indifferent to the needs of their students backfired. Parents vocally supported the sickouts and hundreds of students walked out of their high schools

to oppose a witch-hunt against their teachers for “illegal strikes.”

In Chicago, the third largest school district in the US, tens of thousands of teachers and other school employees are battling the demands of Mayor Rahm Emanuel—a former investment banker who served as Obama's White House chief of staff—to starve the public schools, slash wages and benefits, and funnel even more money to big bondholders and for-profit education firms.

More than three years after the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) betrayed the 2012 strike, leading to the closure of 50 schools and the layoff of more than 1,000 teachers, rank-and-file teachers rebelled against the union and its so-called left leaders, who sought to push through an agreement on behalf of Emanuel to shift pension and health care costs onto the backs of teachers and give school authorities a free hand to expand privately run charter schools.

Last Monday, the CTU's bargaining committee unanimously rejected the deal after rank-and-file teachers began circulating on social media the details of the sellout, which the CTU had hoped to keep secret.

The day after the bargaining committee vote, the school authorities, complaining that they had a deal with the CTU, announced plans to cut \$100 million from the school budget and lay off another 1,000 teachers. Defying this blackmail threat, 2,000 teachers marched in downtown Chicago Thursday evening, drawing expressions of solidarity from thousands of office workers, public employees, young people and other city residents.

The eruption of social opposition among teachers and students is a part of a broader radicalization of the working class, signaling a return of mass class struggles in the US. Last fall, in an incipient rebellion against the United Auto Workers union, autoworkers rejected a national auto contract for the first time in 33 years. The

union was able to push through sellout deals with General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler only by resorting to lies, threats and outright fraud.

In Flint, the birthplace of General Motors and the site of the 1936-37 sit-down strike that established the UAW, working class residents have mobilized to protest the poisoning of the city's water supply by state and local officials, assisted by the Obama administration's Environmental Protection Agency.

These stirrings of the American working class are part of the resurgence of class struggle internationally. From Greece and Brazil to China and South Africa, the working class is coming into conflict with capitalist governments, from the pseudo-left Syriza regime in Greece to the Tory government in Britain, which have imposed savage austerity on workers while transferring vast amounts of wealth to the world's billionaires since the financial breakdown in 2008.

The fight of the teachers directly and urgently poses basic political questions. The AFT and its local affiliates in both Detroit and Chicago, which have long collaborated with the enemies of public education, are trying to smother the movement by promoting the Democratic Party and depicting the attack on education as a purely Republican matter.

This is a fraud. The Obama administration has gone well beyond the reactionary policies of its Republican predecessor in using test-based "accountability" schemes to scapegoat teachers, close so-called failing schools, and undermine the public schools in order to make education a new source of profit for the corporations and banks. Under Obama, more than 300,000 teachers and other school employees have lost their jobs and the number of students enrolled in charter schools has grown at a faster rate, almost doubling, since George Bush left office.

The Obama White House has cut Title 1 funds earmarked for impoverished districts like Detroit and Chicago by 11 percent, while special education funding has been cut by 9 percent. The bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed by Obama late last year to replace Bush's No Child Left Behind Act, authorizes a "Pay for Success" scheme that allows wealthy investors in the for-profit education business to bid for services previously under the control of public schools, including special education, and lowers standards for the education of teachers in high-poverty districts.

The teachers' unions do not oppose the attacks on teachers and public education. They merely seek a seat at the table so they can secure new sources of dues money

from low-paid charter schoolteachers. The unions, including the CTU, whose vice president is a member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, defend the capitalist system and insist that teachers and students must pay for the consequences of its crisis.

The democratic and egalitarian principles embodied in public education are incompatible with a society that is divided by such colossal levels of social inequality that 28 billionaires control as much wealth as the bottom half of the population—152 million people. The American ruling class long ago repudiated the principle that all children, regardless of socioeconomic background, have the right to a quality education.

The corporate and financial elite has nothing to offer working class youth except poverty-level jobs and war. Like the slave owners of an earlier period, today's financial oligarchs want to keep those they exploit in ignorance. They fear the spread of knowledge and culture among a generation that is increasingly dissatisfied with the current state of affairs and determined to have a future free of oppression and war.

While the Chicago teachers were gearing up for mass protests last week, top officers in the Army and Marine Corps were telling a Congressional hearing that it is time for young women to register for a future military draft. On the one hand, schools are being starved of resources and working class students relegated to dilapidated and filthy buildings with over-packed classrooms. On the other hand, the White House is touting plans for a new generation of nuclear missile submarines costing \$6 - \$8 billion each.

The struggle to defend the right to a quality public education is a political struggle against both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend. In this fight, teachers and students must turn to their real allies—the broad mass of working people. The immense social power of the working class must be mobilized to break the grip of the corporate-financial elite over society and reorganize the economy on the basis of public ownership and democratic control of the corporations and banks. Only on this socialist foundation can the basic social rights of working people, including the right to education, be secured.



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