

The International Socialist Organization backs Mayor Emanuel's attack on Chicago teachers

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Earlier this month, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) attempted to push through a contract offer from city and school authorities that would have slashed teacher pay and pensions, reduced staffing levels and increased for-profit charter schools in the nation's third largest school district.

The effort failed only because rank-and-file teachers—who have been working without a contract since June 2015—learned the details of the secret agreement. The CTU's 40-member bargaining committee, fearing a rebellion and defeat of the sellout, unanimously voted to reject the deal on February 1.

Just four days before, CTU President Karen Lewis called the deal a “serious offer” from the city, stating that the “basic framework calls for economic concessions in exchange for enforceable protections of education quality and job security.” CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), also campaigned for the deal.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials, saying they thought they had a deal with the CTU, responded by announcing massive budget cuts, the slashing of 1,000 jobs and a de facto 7 percent pay cut by ending contributions to the teachers pension fund.

After the rejection vote, the CTU has scrambled to regroup in order to dampen resistance to another sellout deal. It has launched a series of harmless protests in an effort to regain control of the teachers. This includes Wednesday's “walk-in” at 200 schools. The stunt, which the CTU's parent union the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is using in Detroit and other cities to prevent sickouts and walkouts by teachers and students, involved coffee and doughnut gatherings before the start of school.

As part of the efforts to bolster the damaged credibility of the CTU, on February 10 the ISO's *socialistworker.org* web site published an article titled, “Rahm declares war on Chicago teachers.” It is co-written by Anthony Cappetta, a member of the CTU's leading Caucus of Rank-and-File

Educators (CORE), and Lee Sustar, a perennial apologist for every union betrayal of workers' struggles.

The article hypocritically attempts to take an “above the fray” perspective regarding the CTU-backed contract, saying there were some good points and bad. It makes it clear, however, that Sharkey and the ISO were pushing the deal.

The article states, “Supporters of the agreement pointed to major concessions by Emanuel, who offered to freeze the expansion of charter schools that already have 61,000 students, as well bar economic layoffs resulting from CPS's budget crunch for the next three years...”

“Advocates of the agreement,” it continues, “also argued that CPS's financial crisis—which has forced the school board to borrow at sky-high interest rates and struggle to sell its bonds—gave teachers no choice but to take a hit economically in return for gains on other fronts...”

The ISO makes no effort to refute the specious claims of the “supporters” of the deal. But the so-called concessions by Emanuel were nothing more than worthless promises to get teachers to accept a devastating rollback in their living standards and conditions. State and federal authorities could easily override the so-called freeze on the number of charter schools. The pause in “economic” layoffs does not prevent CPS from enacting cuts based on fraudulent “under-utilization” figures. In fact, the deal rests on the CTU's agreement for 1,500 “voluntary” retirements.

Such a rotten agreement could only be ratified if its details were hidden from teachers. The article details this conspiracy, without the slightest criticism. “Terms of the contract proposal, presented by union officers and top negotiators to the CTU's big bargaining committee on January 27, were intended to be confidential pending a vote by that committee, scheduled for January 30. However, a January 28 letter to CTU members signed by Lewis announced that CPS had made a ‘serious offer’ to the union... Details of the proposed deal were promptly leaked to the media before the bargaining committee could further

discuss or vote on the deal.

“While there were criticisms of CTU officers for announcing a possible deal before the bargaining committee had made a decision, the debate over the agreement highlighted democracy in the union—something all too rare in today’s labor movement.”

What a fraud! Lewis, Sharkey and the ISO hoped to get the deal passed by the bargaining committee so they could use the vote to pressure teachers into accepting it. The problem was teachers caught them.

During the 2012 strike, the CTU tried a similar undemocratic maneuver, attempting to rush through a vote of its 800-member House of Delegates without providing any details of the settlement it reached with Emanuel. However, teachers insisted that they had the right to know what was in the deal, and the delegates were forced to initially reject the deal. A few days later, the CTU, pointing to injunction threats by Mayor Emanuel, was able to push it through.

The ISO peddles the now discredited myth that the previous walkout ended in victory, asserting that the CTU was gearing up for “the union’s biggest fight since its successful strike of 2012.” In reality, the CTU called off the strike right at the point when it threatened to develop into a broader mobilization of the working class against Emanuel, the Democratic Party and the Obama administration, which has spearheaded the attack on teachers in the name of corporate-backed “school reform.”

The CTU agreed to the mayor’s principal demands: the expansion of test-based teacher evaluations, the lengthening of the school day without compensation and increased authority for the administrators to hire and fire teachers. Shortly afterward, thousands of teachers and support staff were laid off, hundreds of millions in budget cuts were enacted and 50 schools were closed in the largest wave of closures in US history. The betrayal of the strike paved the way for relentless school closures, teacher layoffs and attacks on pay and benefits in Detroit; Philadelphia; Washington, DC; Seattle and other cities.

In the article, the ISO writers lament that “some CTU members,” despite the best efforts of the ISO and other pseudo-left organizations, “have concluded that the 2012 strike was not as successful as they first believed...”

The basic aim of the ISO is to maintain the credibility of the CTU and the Democratic Party. Far from being “socialist,” the ISO functions a faction of the Chicago Democrats, which is most concerned in guaranteeing that the unions and various black and Latino politicians and entrepreneurs will get a share of the spoils from the dismantling of public education. After the betrayal of the 2012 strike, for example, the city’s largest charter school

operator—a close ally of Emanuel—allowed a CTU-affiliated union to “organize,” i.e., collect union dues, from his low-paid teachers.

“Now,” the ISO writers declare, “the proposed agreement has been formally rejected, and the city has declared war. Both supporters and opponents of the deal previously are now united in preparing for a fight.” In other words, teachers should forget that the CTU just tried to ram the mayor’s contract down their throats and unconditionally accept the authority of the CTU, even as it prepares another sellout.

They write further, “[CPS CEO Forrest] Claypool—fronting for his boss, Mayor Rahm Emanuel, and the city’s ruling elite—is trying to create a crisis atmosphere to drive a wedge among union members...” According to the ISO, any teacher who criticizes the CTU is really doing the dirty work of Emanuel and dividing “union members” in the face of the enemy.

In reality, the “wedge” already exists: between the CTU, which is aligned with Emanuel on the one side, and rank-and-file teachers and other workers who are fighting to defend their living standards and the right to quality public education, on the other.

As for creating a “crisis atmosphere,” it is Lewis and Sharkey who have repeatedly echoed the district’s demands that teachers must pay for a manufactured crisis. This crisis has not been caused by pensions, but by decades of federal and state budget cuts, criminal financial dealings and the diversion of public resources to educational businesses.

In a press conference last June, Lewis said, “We understand that there is a serious financial problem and we are willing to work within that framework. We accept that there will be a 0 percent raise. But give us something to make that 0 percent feel better.” Earlier this month, when asked by an interviewer on *Chicago Tonight* whether there were any further concessions the union could make, Sharkey responded, “Everything is on the table.”

If the ISO offers occasional criticisms of “Emanuel and his wealthy backers,” they do so only to fool teachers and other workers, while Sharkey and other ISO operatives pursue privileges and positions of influence in the unions and, one day they hope, within the capitalist government itself. Their pretensions of “socialism” are nothing but camouflage for policies and a political orientation deeply hostile to the working class.



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