

The conspiracy against the Chicago teachers

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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has called an “All Schools Contract Summit” for today, billed as an opportunity for teachers to “organize our power in the school and community” and “defend quality public schools.” It is, in fact, nothing of the sort. Behind the scenes, the CTU is collaborating with the Democratic Party administration of Rahm Emanuel to impose further attacks on teachers and on public education.

The summit has been called under conditions in which the CTU has forced teachers to work for nearly a year without a contract, despite an overwhelming strike authorization vote last December. The CTU is blocking any struggle as Emanuel and the Chicago Public Schools threaten mass layoffs and wage and benefit cuts. Over the same period, the state government budget impasse is being used to blackmail teachers and go after every institution dependent on state funding, especially colleges and universities.

Just last week, district principals were ordered by CPS CEO Forrest Claypool to stop spending ahead of a \$688 million pension payment due June 30. On February 29, 62 layoffs were announced, including 17 teachers.

In opposing the attack on their jobs and on public education, teachers can win mass support in the working class as a whole. The city is riven by high youth unemployment, the proliferation of low-wage jobs, the cutting of basic social services and brutal police repression. Similar conditions prevail throughout the country.

The central aim of the CTU is to contain this anger and prevent it from developing into a political conflict with the Democratic Party, with which it is aligned. To this end, CTU President Karen Lewis seized on the announcement by the Emanuel administration that it would temporarily shelve its immediate threat to effectively cut teacher pay by 7 percent as an opportunity to cancel the April 1 one-day strike

announced earlier this week.

The CTU followed up Lewis’s calling off of the toothless one-day strike threat with an announcement for an even more toothless “day of action.” The union called for participation from whoever feels like protesting against whoever they perceive to be causing their grievances.

This is all only to better prepare the offensive against teachers. Nothing that Lewis says about fighting concessions and defending public education can be believed. Throughout the behind-the-scenes negotiations, CTU leaders have repeatedly insisted that they understand the “seriousness” of the budget crisis and the need to accept major cuts in the next contract, while keeping details of what they are prepared to impose secret.

The current operations of the CTU are in line with its role in imposing concessions after concessions on teachers. In 2012, the CTU isolated the strike by teachers and prevented the enormous opposition to school closures and cuts from developing into a fight against Emanuel and the Obama administration. After the CTU ended the strike and agreed to a contract that accepted all the basic demands of Emanuel, the city went on the offensive, closing 50 elementary schools and laying off more than 1,000 teachers.

Last spring CTU leaders displayed their willingness to work with Emanuel to enact more cuts, echoing bipartisan claims about the “severity” of the budget crisis and boasting of their now friendly relationship with Emanuel. The mayor, Lewis declared, was “a changed man.”

After the contract expired June 30, Emanuel—who pledged to continue the aggressive school privatization policy of his first term—demanded major concessions in compensation and benefits, and began threatening layoffs.

The character of the CTU’s negotiations over a new

contract was revealed when the union brought what Lewis called “a serious offer” to the bargaining committee earlier this year. Lewis made clear that the CTU was prepared to agree to a deal that she said “calls for economic concessions in exchange for enforceable protections of education quality and job security.” In fact, the proposal included the de facto pay cut of 7 percent through increased pension contributions, while the pledges of job security were entirely worthless.

After details of the agreement were leaked, the CTU bargaining committee, recognizing that it would be impossible to push through given the level of dissatisfaction among teachers, voted to reject the offer.

Making clear that the CTU was still preparing to push through an agreement, however, CTU Vice President and International Socialist Organization member Jesse Sharkey said last month, in relation to the pension cuts, that “everything is on the table.”

None of the basic issues confronting teachers will be addressed at today’s “summit.” Above all, the CTU wants to prevent teachers from coming to the conclusion that they confront a struggle against the Democratic Party and the Obama administration—and the CTU itself.

During the past seven years of the Obama administration, the ruling class has orchestrated a massive redistribution of wealth, from the bottom layers of the population to the top. The richest 20 individuals in the US now control more assets than the bottom half of the population, or 152 million. Untold trillions have financed bank bailouts and the Pentagon war machine, while basic social services are crumbling. With 3 million teachers in the US, public education is a prime target for further cuts.

The CTU is playing the same role in Chicago that the AFL-CIO plays throughout the country. These are not “workers organizations.” Whether it is the American Federation of Teachers and its support for school privatization, or the United Auto Workers and the United Steelworkers and their collaboration in the destruction of jobs and benefits, the so-called unions are in fact pro-capitalist adjuncts of the corporate and financial elite. In the current presidential elections, they will once again attempt to bolster the Democratic Party, one of the principle political instruments of the ruling class.

Independent struggles are emerging. Earlier this year

Detroit teachers initiated a round of sickouts in opposition to the disastrous state of public education in that city. They acted independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, which is beholden to the interests of the ruling class and a political alliance with the Democrats, just like their counterparts in Chicago.

The way forward is 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 capitalism, an economic system based on exploitation, poverty and war.



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