

Chicago Teachers Union approves one-day stunt “strike” on April 1

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On March 23, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) house of delegates voted 486-124 in favor of a one-day strike set for April 1. The action, appropriately held on April Fool’s day, is the latest stunt in the CTU’s efforts to dissipate the anger of teachers and facilitate a new round of attacks on public education.

CTU leaders have alternately described the action as a one-day strike over stalled negotiations and continued cuts to jobs and spending, or as a protest against the lack of a budget agreement between Democrats and Republicans in the Illinois legislature.

Tens of thousands of Illinois state workers and 28,000 Chicago teachers and other school workers have been working without a contract since June 30. Negotiations between the CTU and the Democratic administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel have dragged on for more than a year as they seek some way of overcoming widespread anger among teachers.

The city has already imposed more than 60 layoffs and three furlough days on teachers and staff to cut costs.

As part of its efforts to cover for the Democratic Party and the Emanuel administration, the CTU is portraying Republican Governor Bruce Rauner as the main villain in the ongoing state budget impasse, even though state and local Democrats, supported by the union, have underfunded the schools and pensions for decades.

On March 12, the CTU held an “All Schools Contract Summit” purportedly to “organize our power in the school and community” and “defend quality public schools.” As the WSWS wrote at the time, the event was nothing of the sort. It culminated in an announcement to news media of the April 1 “day of action,” followed by a conflicting series of announcements about what that would entail.

Later, CTU President Lewis said a vote to strike for one day would be taken by CTU delegates March 23. A vote by teachers overwhelmingly in favor of a strike was taken back in November, but the CTU has worked to prevent any struggle against the attacks by Democrats and Republicans alike.

The main purpose of the summit was to coordinate the actions of the CTU with other unions, including the United Auto Workers, and Democratic Party officials. The unions are also gearing up for an election campaign to back the Democratic Party in November.

CPS CEO Forrest Claypool has said that a walkout is illegal, since a mandated fact-finding process does not officially end until May. The CTU claims that cuts the district has made to jobs and working hours constitute an unfair labor practice, as teachers have been without a contract, giving teachers the right to strike. The five-person Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board, whose members are hand-picked by the governor—three were appointed by Rauner—will decide whether a walkout is legal.

In response to the risk of censure, CTU President Lewis said, “We have our theory, they have theirs. Some judge will figure that out at some point.” One would be hard-pressed to find a less serious or more careless attitude toward the fate of teachers.

The CTU’s collaboration with the Emanuel administration to impose further attacks on teachers and on public education continues as negotiations drag on. The character of the negotiations was revealed when the union brought a tentative agreement Lewis called “a serious offer” to the bargaining committee in January. 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 reality, the proposal

included a de facto pay cut of 7 percent through increased pension contributions.

After details of this agreement were leaked, the CTU bargaining committee recognized that it would be impossible to push the deal through given the level of dissatisfaction among teachers, and voted to reject the offer. But CTU Vice President Sharkey emphasized his commitment to finding some way to push through Emanuel's demands, particularly as they relate to pension cuts. "Everything is on the table," he said.

The political line being put forward by the CTU is that the budget crisis has to be resolved in order for a fair contract to be agreed on, placing the primary onus on Republicans. However, Emanuel long ago established his record on cutting costs and expanding privately run charters. Teachers have gone through the bitter experiences of mass school closures and thousands of layoffs, made possible by the CTU's betrayal of the 2012 teachers strike.

The central question teachers must confront at this stage is the role of the CTU and its parent, the American Federation of Teachers, in subordinating teachers to the Democratic Party, which has led the attack on public education in Chicago and across the nation under President Barack Obama.

In an attempt to obscure this basic conflict between teachers and the Emanuel administration, CTU leader Stephanie Gadlin went so far as to ask CPS CEO Claypool to walk out with them on April 1.

While Claypool declined the offer, he did express his basic agreement with the CTU's position on pressuring the Republican governor and covering up the role of the Democrats. He said to *Crain's Chicago Business*, "While we are disappointed by the CTU leadership's course of action, we share their belief that [Gov. Bruce Rauner] must fix the education-funding formula that discriminates against Chicago's children and poor minority children around the state. The governor's failure to fully fund education has pushed Chicago Public Schools and too many other Illinois schools into financial crisis."

Many teachers have expressed their opposition to the one-day strike plans. There is also concern a walkout could cause teachers to be victimized—if not by the district when they do walkout, then by the union if they refuse.

Significantly, teachers demanded to know why the

walkout is on April 1, in the middle of a pay period in which they have already been furloughed and will be hit hard financially. As it turns out, the timing of the walkout is entirely opportunistic: around 2,000 CTU supporters are expected to be in town for a Labor Notes conference in Chicago April 1-3, and the CTU and other unions expect them to participate in the stunt.

Some teachers and school workers expressed their frustration directly on the CTU's Facebook page. One worker writes, "I voted to authorize a strike however I do not support a one day walk-out. I think it sends a bad message to the students and as a clerk I will come back to two days of work and have to stay late (without pay) to get the work done. I take pride in what I do and want it to be done correctly and on time. If we have to strike then strike, stop playing games."

Another teacher wrote, "This has been setting up since the 2012 strike, since the 50+ schools closed, since the administration changed. We are all educated. Let's not pretend we didn't see a showdown coming. We should have voted to strike at earliest possible date and stood our ground..."

A serious struggle to defend teachers and public education must be mounted. However, this requires a political struggle against the Democratic and Republican Parties and the profit system they defend. In such a struggle, the CTU stands not as an ally, but a determined foe.

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