

Chicago Teachers Union holds one-day “strike” to channel opposition behind Democrats

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On April 1, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) called a phony, one-day “strike” of teachers who have worked ten months without a contract as the CTU negotiates with the Democratic administration of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and Emanuel are demanding sharply increased pension costs and health care benefits. The central aim of the “walkout” was to channel mass opposition among teachers to the attack on their jobs and on public education behind the Democratic Party, which is spearheading school privatization efforts in Illinois and throughout the country.

In order to cover up the role of the Democrats and the Obama administration, the CTU focused opposition on Republican Governor Bruce Rauner and the 10-month budget impasse in the state legislature, which has left higher education and social services crumbling without state funds. State Democrats and Republicans have been unable to conclude a budget agreement since June 30, not due to any principled differences, but rather disagreement on where precisely cuts will be made.

The CTU made teacher participation in the April 1 action mandatory. Numerous teachers expressed outrage on social media that the union threatened teachers with punitive actions if they did not support the stunt “strike.”

The CTU joined efforts with faculty unions and community groups at state and local colleges, putting on a series of events. Several thousand students and faculty gathered at Northeastern Illinois University, where faculty are under threat of losing their jobs.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, a close ally of the Obama administration, addressed the crowd at NEIU.

Weingarten’s comments set the political tone for the day’s event, obscuring the class character of the bipartisan attacks on education and portraying the governor as the sole villain: “What you see here is the outrage of a community at the

blatant disregard by a governor of children,” Weingarten declared. “Do your job, Governor Rauner—and your job is to not hurt schools and not disinvest.”

Jesse Jackson opened Friday’s proceedings with CTU President Karen Lewis at Chicago State University, currently under threat of closure due to the state budget impasse. Jackson, a longtime Democratic Party operative, was called in by the CTU as it was preparing to shut down the strike by teachers in 2012 and force through a contract that paved the way for mass school closings.

WSWS reporters spoke to teachers participating in the day’s events, distributing the statement, “CTU calls phony one-day ‘strike’ to back Democrats.”

Teachers expressed a determination to fight in defense of public education. Mona, a CPS public school teacher, spoke on the need to fund public education. “The government needs to put funds for education and our students. When they start talking about the privatization of schools, they get to choose which students are allowed to have an education, and they are trying to get rid of our neighborhood public schools.

“Yet the whole neighborhood is saying, ‘Let’s not do charter schools.’ They say there’s no money for education, and the next thing you know they are opening charter schools in those neighborhoods. There’s something fishy going on.”

Another teacher, Diane, added, “Across the whole nation they say, ‘There’s no money.’ They found money to pay Wall Street and the system. We want our needs to be met, but now they want to charge us teachers for going out on strike and make us pay.”

When reporters pointed to the phony character of the CTU’s “strike”, Mona agreed and expressed the skepticism many teachers felt about the action: “We’re not opposed to a strike. We were opposed to more of a one-day action. If we were going to be serious, let’s have a serious strategy. We felt that we should have gone on strike earlier to organize

more effectively.”

Jennifer, a teacher walking away from the rainy march, said, “I support the walkout because we need to change the way the mayor and the governor are thinking. We are fighting for equal funding, for public education. At the same time, I think whatever they patch up together for the contract will not be sufficient for the long term. They’ve diverted funds into buildings, finance and other places. They have no money for the real priorities. Education should be public, not private.”

Asked what she thought about the CTU, Jennifer said, “We’re also questioning what the union is supposed to be doing. We’d like to trust them, but I’m not entirely sure. In some ways, I think you’re right, there is a division between the union and the teachers. It’s hard to tell, but we may be getting to that point.”

A teacher from the South Side said, “Our demands are for a good pension, a good salary, good working conditions, classroom sizes. The list can go on and on. I work at a school where they had to do a major cleaning. We had rodents, and they were not maintaining the school. If they’re not maintaining the schools, they are going to fall apart. It’s a question of resources. It always goes back to money.”

At the same time, the teacher had contradictory opinions about the CTU’s role and its politics. She expressed support in the union, saying, “The job of the union is to make the right decisions for us. I think Karen Lewis and [CTU Vice President] Jesse Sharkey are working on our behalf. But I don’t agree with any cuts to our pensions if that’s what’s on the table. We are not going to give up our pensions and go backwards.”

Sharkey has said that “everything is on the table” in relation to the negotiations with the CPS and Emanuel.

When WSWS reporters explained that there is a bipartisan attack on public education, the teacher nodded. “I agree, and this just didn’t happen overnight. We have to bring a light to our problems.”

Ryan, a first-year high school chemistry teacher, said that the most important issue for him was “funding for the schools.” He added, “We’re being told left and right that we’re going to lose our jobs, that they’re going to cut positions and close schools. Having funding should be a basic right for education. The money is going somewhere else, but not for us.”

When asked about the nature of the “strike” and whether he agreed with Lewis and Sharkey that “concessions need to be made” and that “everything is on the table,” including the seven percent pension pickup, Ryan responded, “I do not. I’m a first-year teacher, and I’m really happy to even have a job. I’m going with what our union is saying to teachers. But, no, I don’t want to lose more than seven percent of my

pay for pensions.

“I work overtime, crazy hours for moderate pay, and they’re saying ‘We need you to work more for less.’ It just kinda shows that the union and CPS are playing a chess game at our expense. We’re just pawns. They’re just using us.

“We’re told our union knows how to help us. They say they know how to get us what we want. And they talk about how they did so well three, four years ago? And here we are after the last strike to fight for education again.

“There’s a lot we don’t really know, and we’re kept in the dark. We’re supposed to ‘trust our union’ to take care of us. What is the alternative strategy for us? Our entire school voted against the walkout. We didn’t want to do this without a sense of why we’re going on strike so late into the school year.”

A group of retired teachers and a Head Start educator also spoke to the WSWS. Mary said, “I’m a retired teacher of 34 years. I come to support the teachers in solidarity. Chicago teachers have not been given support at all. They are taking away teachers’ position to be able to teach effectively in the classroom.

“The people at the top—Rahm Emanuel and Governor Rauner—are setting up children for failure. They need to leave teachers alone, so they can teach effectively. Currently they can’t do that because their hands are tied. We don’t have adequate resources for the children to be successful. Our classes are overloaded and overcrowded, and the children are not being taught the basic skills they need to be taught at their learning stages.

“We’re here as educators, and we spend all our money on children in the classroom. They’re building more jails than schools. And our country is beginning to fail.

“Everyone deserves a good public education as a basic right. There’s plenty of money for education. There’s money in Wall Street! They’re taking our money. And then they are taking our pensions and say they have no money.

“Now we have these Democrats like Rahm Emanuel that are closet Republicans, and they are not for education. If you look at Obama with ‘Race to the Top,’ it’s the same thing.”

Winnie, another retired teacher, added, “We need a general strike, like they did in the 1930s and in the old days. I’m retired and not working anymore, but I will be out here and march with all teachers and workers. We should shut the entire system down. Not a single wheel should turn.”



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