

Working to impose concessions, Chicago Teachers Union calls off strike date

Kristina Betinis
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As the 2015-2016 school year nears its end, teachers in major cities in the US continue to face attacks on their pay, benefits and working conditions. In Detroit last week, 1,500 teachers walked out for two days to protest the district emergency manager's threat to withhold their summer pay.

Teachers in Chicago have been working without a contract for nearly 11 months, threatened with several thousand layoffs, a multiyear pay freeze and higher health insurance costs, among other cuts. The most contentious issue is the Emanuel administration's insistence that teachers take a de facto 7 percent pay cut by having teachers shoulder their own pension contributions.

For months, teachers' resolve to combat these attacks has been suppressed by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Last week, CTU leader and International Socialist Organization member Jesse Sharkey announced that the union had decided not to set a strike date at a delegate meeting, citing concerns ranging from wage loss and loss of health insurance coverage to "the mood not being there" among teachers.

The CTU has been working systematically to block a struggle against the Emanuel administration, amidst growing anger among teachers and other sections of the working class.

A recent poll of Chicagoans conducted by the *New York Times* and the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 59 percent support a teachers' strike. In the months since the teachers' contract expired on June 30, 2015, it is the CTU that has kept teachers on the job without a contract, stalled strike action, and put on stunt actions, including a "mock strike vote" in November of last year and a one-day April Fools' Day walkout.

After an overwhelming strike vote in December, the CTU brought a concessions contract to teachers less

than one month later. CTU President Karen Lewis called it "a serious offer" and made clear that the union was prepared to accept "economic concessions in exchange for enforceable protections of education quality and job security." The proposal included increased pension contributions, while the pledges of job security were unenforceable.

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

Shortly after, in February, Sharkey clearly communicated the CTU's eagerness to push through the concessions. In regard to the pension cuts, "everything is on the table," he insisted.

A further obstacle to the CTU's plans for a swifter settlement with Emanuel was the political crisis of his administration precipitated by the November 2015 release of video footage of Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke shooting African-American teenager Laquan MacDonald 16 times. Hundreds protested when it came to light that the young man was murdered in cold blood, and that Emanuel and the city council had covered up the crime by refusing to prosecute the cop, suppressing the video footage and evidence of police and state prosecutor cover-up.

This undermined the CTU's attempts to openly promote Emanuel and drive dissatisfaction into the Democratic Party's efforts, alongside Emanuel and CPS CEO Forrest Claypool, to lobby politicians in the state capital to restructure education. Both the city administration and the CTU have used the reportedly \$1 billion budget deficit in Chicago Public Schools to try to force teachers to accept cuts in pay and benefits.

The sham character of the CTU leadership's

supposed plan to take a strike vote this month was revealed by Emanuel himself, two days prior to the question being brought to union delegates on May 4.

On May 2, Emanuel boasted of his agreement with CTU not to strike, telling media, “The good news is they agreed not to strike.” In a feeble attempt to try to cover for his open collaboration with Emanuel and suppression of teacher opposition, Sharkey responded, “The Union’s members have yet to decide when or if we will go on strike in the coming days or during the next school year.”

Following the meeting, where no strike date was set, Sharkey told reporters, “We’ve made a serious play about getting the schools funded; we have to watch that play out. Right now, we’re focused on trying to get revenue.”

The “serious play” Sharkey referred to is the recently announced “revenue recovery” package the union is urging the city council to pass. The plan claims to be able to produce as much as \$502 million in revenue for the school district by re-implementing a tax on corporations connected to the number of people they employ, which was repealed in 2014. It would also reform the tax increment financing (TIF) district funds, which siphons tax money for schools into mayor-controlled slush funds for private developers.

Several of the taxes proposed would hit working people, including an additional 10 cent tax on each gallon of gasoline purchased, as well as taxes on ride-sharing services and certain municipal improvements.

The political situation in the city will become increasingly volatile in the summer months and into the fall. Mayor Rahm Emanuel is widely despised, and the CTU is discredited in the view of a broad section of teachers.

The nation’s three million teachers are at the forefront of an assault as public education continues to be a prime target for spending cuts. In the 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. This attack will be escalated following the November presidential vote, whoever is elected.

The defense of public education and the rights of teachers cannot be carried forward through the CTU. Even if the CTU were to call a strike at some point, it would be aimed at letting off steam in an effort to force

through concessions—as happened in 2012. The fight of teachers must be advanced through the formation of independent organizations of struggle and an appeal to all sections of the working class to wage a common fight against the Democratic and Republican parties and the capitalist system they both defend.



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