Chicago Teachers Union announces concessions agreement to avert strike

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11 October 2016

Standing next to Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's Chief Education Officer Janice Jackson, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Karen Lewis announced a tentative four-year concessions agreement minutes before an October 11 midnight deadline, averting a strike.

Lewis stated, “There are things we all give up, it’s not a perfect agreement... but it was good.” The key concession in what the CTU called “a fair contract” is a two-tier system for teacher pensions. Emanuel’s main demand that teachers pay an additional seven percent of their salaries toward pensions will be phased in for new hires. Lewis noted some salary changes might be made to offset these cuts, but no further details were given.

No timeline was announced for when the contract will go before the city’s 25,000 teachers and paraprofessionals. Lewis trumpeted empty promises from the school district on class sizes and layoff procedures, but no details have been released.

All of this is a cheap ploy to make Emanuel’s main demand—givebacks on pensions that have been firmly opposed by teachers—more palatable in an effort to force through a rotten agreement.

Based on a 2011 Illinois law, SB 7—a bipartisan bill backed by both national teachers unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which includes the CTU—teachers cannot officially bargain over working conditions, including class sizes, outsourcing, staffing, layoffs and the length of the school year. But CTU officials, desperate to settle and avoid a strike, have stressed that these issues could at least be discussed during negotiations.

The long drawn-out negotiations between school district officials and the CTU have meant that teachers have been working without a contract for 15 months. This impasse is just one element of the political crisis of the Democratic administration of Rahm Emanuel, which faced major protests in 2015 and 2016 against police violence. Emanuel is also scheduled to give a speech on the 2017 city budget on Tuesday.

After decades of wage cuts, austerity and increasing police violence, and in the midst of an election contest between two deeply despised candidates, there is growing anger and opposition among workers throughout the country. Teachers in particular have faced thousands of layoffs, overcrowded and understaffed school conditions, relentless budget cuts and the ever-present threats of additional cuts.

Throughout the protracted contract negotiations, the CTU has sought desperately to prevent any conflict between teachers and the Democratic Party, in which Emanuel is a leading figure. The CTU’s parent union, the AFT, has endorsed Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and is energetically campaigning for her.

Despite the last minute announcement, the agreement comes as no surprise. Both Emanuel and Lewis remarked in recent days on their improved relationship, with Emanuel telling the *Sun Times* this weekend, “We have a good working relationship. When she makes a core request, I try to hear it, listen. … There’s no [longer] overwhelming personalities at the table. … The general attitude collectively is to try to find an agreement within the financial envelope of Chicago Public Schools.”

Emanuel is hoping that the agreement with the CTU will pave the way for a renewed attack on public education, as happened after the 2012 strike, while the union is tasked with selling the deal to a hostile membership. Amid the intense efforts to reach an agreement in recent days, the district announced about

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250 layoffs of teachers and staff based on a reported decline in school enrollment. Some 2,000 teachers and staff have been laid off this year.

Preparations are also underway to close additional schools, this time with greater so-called “community involvement.” A recent report on the guidelines for next year’s school closings and consolidations indicates that CPS will seek input from parents, principals, local school council members and others on how closures and consolidations are carried out.

The financial crisis of the city of Chicago, and in particular its schools, has been remarkably profitable in recent months for major financial institutions. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that JPMorgan Chase and Nuveen Investments, a subsidiary of TIAA-CREF, made $110 million on a $763 million purchase of municipal bonds purchased from Chicago Public Schools.

The agreement announced between the CTU and Emanuel is further proof that the CTU functions as an agency of the state in imposing the demands of the ruling class on teachers. The WSWS calls on teachers to reject the sell-out contract and form independent committees to mobilize the entire working class in defense of jobs, working conditions and public education.

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