

Chicago teachers denounce contract sellout

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Late Monday night, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) announced a tentative four-year agreement with the Democratic administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Immediately teachers and parents took to social media to denounce the contract terms as well as city and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials and the CTU, which took nearly two years in behind-the-scenes negotiations to produce the concessions contract. Plans to put the current agreement before teachers for a vote have not yet been announced.

The new deal differs little from the agreement the union's bargaining team was forced to reject last January after opposition from the rank and file. That deal included a seven percent de facto pay cut to cover pensions and hikes to health care costs.

Concessions in the new deal include a phasing out of the "pension pickup," where the city, in exchange for teacher wage cuts years ago, agreed to pay a portion of teacher pension contributions. Current teachers will keep the "pension pickup" but new hires will have to pay in full, amounting to a seven percent pay cut. The CTU claims these extra costs will be made up in salary adjustments over several years for new teachers. Teachers are also being asked to accept close to a one percent increase in their health care costs as well as higher copays.

The key concession demanded by Emanuel, the phasing out of the pension contributions, incentivizes the district to lay off the most experienced teachers, with the union playing a role in aiding that process. The contract forms a budget oversight board, formalizing the union's role in the board of education's decisions on how Emanuel's education policies will be meted out. For years, veteran teachers have been targeted for layoffs due their relatively higher salaries and outspokenness against school cuts and privatization.

Teachers took to social media to express their anger at the terms of the agreement, arguing that after two

years of negotiations, CTU had won nothing new, failed to protect what they do have for new hires, and did not reverse the deep cuts to staff and programs that have negatively impacted classroom instruction and student development and wellness.

Most contentious is the CTU's agreement to pit newer hires against veteran teachers in phasing out the pension pickup. Calling it a "recipe for disaster" and an abandonment of the spirit of "all for one and one for all," teachers' criticisms on Facebook and Twitter sound just like those of workers in the private sector, notably autoworkers, who have been subject to various tiered wage and benefit schemes to drive down labor costs and casualize the workforce.

Many teachers pointedly remarked on the absence of any mention of school closings. A five-year moratorium on school closings ends in 2017. In preparation for more layoffs, the contract offers laid-off teachers placement in an "available vacancy" or if that's unavailable, 10 months severance pay, up from five. In other words, many younger teachers will never attain the promised wage increases because they will lose their jobs.

Other terms of the contract highlighted as "successes" by CTU reveal how difficult working conditions are in public schools. The agreement states that classrooms with 32 or more students in kindergarten through second grade (seven- and eight-year-olds) should have a classroom aide. There are no class size restrictions for older students. Teachers speaking out on social media today said that ballooning class sizes are the single greatest challenge they face on a daily basis.

Some of the most vocal opposition to the contract has come from special education teachers, who have been working under extraordinarily difficult conditions for close to a decade. Just last summer, Special Ed programs were hit with hundreds of layoffs. None of

the cuts to those programs have been restored in the agreement. Instead a toothless grievance procedure will be instituted to supposedly hold the district to Illinois law governing Special Ed classroom numbers and work conditions.

The pseudo-left International Socialist Organization continues to play a foul role in blocking a strike and negotiating a sellout contract. In addition to occupying a leading position in the CTU bureaucracy in the person of CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a main player in the negotiations, there is also the role of its mouthpiece, SocialistWorker.org.

In supporting the CTU's betrayal, Alan Maass and Lee Sustar write in an article posted Tuesday that "CPS had made major concessions on key issues in the contract fight."

The ISO provides an apologia for the union's collaboration with Emanuel, who they acknowledge is a deeply discredited and hated figure. Maass and Sustar try to justify the settlement by making the absurd claim that it was Emanuel who capitulated to teachers in order to avoid a strike.

"An open-ended strike could have finished off his already damaged political career," they write. "The mayor was facing the prospect of a mass picket line surrounding City Hall during his speech on the city budget, set for what would have been day one of the strike."

This only underscores the depth of the joint betrayal carried out by the CTU and the ISO. Emanuel's weakness and political crisis argue not for a last-minute deal to avoid a strike and accept a concessions-laden deal, but for a full-scale strike and the mobilization of the mass support for the teachers that exists in Chicago and across the state and the country.

It is precisely in order to rescue Emanuel and block such a mobilization of the working class that the CTU and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, in concert with the ISO, did everything they could to prevent a strike. They sacrificed the jobs, living standards and working conditions of Chicago teachers, and the educational conditions for students, to prop up Emanuel and the Democratic Party as a whole. Tied to the Obama administration and the Democrats, the unions are desperately campaigning to put Hillary Clinton in the White House and they are determined to prevent any struggles of the working class that could

interfere with this objective.

Dragging out the negotiations, refusing to set strike dates, lowering expectations by insisting the city is broke were all part of CTU's agreement to work—as Emanuel himself put it—"within the financial envelope" of his schools plan.

In the four years since the 2012 strike, during which Emanuel has been on the offensive against public education and against educators, threatening and then carrying out thousands of layoffs and closing 50 schools, the CTU has sought to collaborate with his administration. In the same period, teacher opposition has mounted to those policies with every passing month, evidenced in public statements and strike votes of 95 and 96 percent.

The fact is, there never was any threat of an open-ended strike from the CTU leadership. This is because the union nearly lost control of the strike in 2012 and was absolutely determined this time around to block any recurrence of such a situation.

It is the fate of leading Democrats that the CTU and ISO are looking out for, and whose good graces they seek. Their interests are directly opposed to those of teachers, students and working families.

This only underscores the need for rank-and-file teachers to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CTU. Rank-and-file committees should be elected to mount a campaign to defeat this sellout contract and fight for the mobilization of the entire working class in the city to oppose the corporate-backed attacks on teachers and fight for the right to quality public education for all.



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