

The International Socialist Organization and the Chicago teachers contract betrayal

Marcus Day
13 October 2016

At midnight on Monday, officials for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) announced a last-minute “tentative agreement,” blocking a strike by 25,000 teachers and paraprofessionals.

The proposed four-year contract is essentially the same as, if not worse than, the one the CTU bargaining committee was forced to reject in February this year after major provisions were leaked on social media, provoking widespread opposition. The agreement is a further attack on the living standards of teachers and the learning conditions of the nearly 400,000 children and young people in Chicago’s public schools. If it is forced through, it would set the stage for more school closures, more layoffs and the further dismantling of public education, which for the past eight years has been spearheaded nationally by the Obama administration.

The deal, worked out behind closed doors over the past 15 months by the CTU and the Democratic Party administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, is also a devastating exposure of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), whose member Jesse Sharkey is the vice president of the CTU, as an accomplice in the pro-corporate attacks on teachers and public education. The ISO is carrying forward the work it began in earnest with its sabotage of the 2012 Chicago teachers strike, which it sought to falsely portray during and since as a “victory.”

Immediately following the announcement of details of the latest agreement Monday night, the ISO published a colossally dishonest article, titled “Chicago teachers get a tentative agreement,” which seeks to market the deal to teachers using phony “left” rhetoric.

It begins with a lie: “Alan Maass [the editor of the ISO’s newspaper and web site] and Lee Sustar report on what we know about a tentative deal that headed off the second teachers’ strike in four years.” For the authors to suggest they are just now learning and are only aware of the initial framework of the deal, when their organization has in effect led the contract negotiations, is preposterous.

Throughout the article, Maass and Sustar attempt to portray the CTU as having been “locked in a bitter battle” with Emanuel and the school board. This fabrication has been repeatedly contradicted by the leadership of the union itself, with CTU President Karen Lewis praising her relationship with Emanuel, and Sharkey offering that “everything is on the table” in the contract negotiations.

In an admission that discloses the real outcome of the CTU and ISO in “heading off” a strike, Maass and Sustar write in their

article, “An open-ended strike could have finished off [Emanuel’s] already damaged political career.” Precisely. Instead of conducting a struggle, the ISO and CTU have instead come to the rescue of Emanuel and the Democratic Party.

About both the latest agreement and the 2012 teachers strike, the authors declare, “As in 2012, when the CTU’s nine-day strike shook the city, the union appears to have pushed back CPS’s harshest concession demands and won some long-sought contract provisions.” To claim, however, that anything of substance could have been achieved in the current contract negotiations without a genuine struggle is ludicrous.

They assert the city “mostly caved on the so-called ‘pension pickup,’” in which CPS had previously paid pension contributions equivalent to 7 percent of teachers’ salaries, a practice that had been implemented in return for wage cuts years ago. In fact, as they go on to blithely note, the pickup will be eliminated for new hires (supposedly to be offset by a salary increase), an effort to divide to teachers and reduce future labor costs.

Offering a craven apology for further major concessions the CTU handed over to Emanuel, they write, “Increases in base pay are meager, adding up to 4.5 percent in the final years of a four-year contract...CPS will be able to increase CTU members’ contributions to health care, but by less than 1 percent of total pay over the course of a year. That’s a setback, but other unions have suffered worse in recent bargaining.”

What the ISO neglects to mention is what the CTU views as its major achievement in the negotiations: the creation of a joint union-school board advisory budget committee, which will enable the union (and the ISO) to play an even more direct role in the administration of cuts to education.

In a live Facebook interview with *Crain’s Chicago Business* on Tuesday, Emanuel, egged on by reporters for the right-wing business magazine to disclose the extent of the attacks on teachers, offers an account that contradicts the rosy picture painted by the ISO. Unable to prevent himself from boasting about the concessions that he extracted, he gloats, “I believed in the January deal, as did the [CTU] leadership. They couldn’t pass that. So we have the first contract *ever* between the city and any labor union, let alone the teachers union, that has on the COLA [cost of living adjustments to teachers’ salaries] 0, 0, 2, 2.5 [yearly percent increases]. If you compared it to January, that was 0, 2.75, 3 and 3.

“Second, there hasn’t been a change to either the [health care] plans and networks, the deductibles, the premiums, or the co-pays

since a little over a decade. This one, there's a significant change to all of those, totaling almost \$60 million in health care savings [i.e., cuts to teachers' benefits].

"Third, while the components are different, the overall financial package of this saving money for CPS and bending the cost curve is the same [as the January proposal]." Emanuel goes on to state that the contract's cuts to teachers' compensation would save CPS between \$200-300 million dollars over its four years.

There are no doubt further concessions concealed within fine print of the agreement. On Tuesday, CPS spokeswoman Emily Bittner said, "During the coming days, CPS will respect the CTU's process for deliberating on this contract, and we expect to have more details to share after the CTU has had a chance to share information with their members," i.e., after the union has had time to spin it and try to ram it through.

The ISO first came into the leadership of the CTU in 2010, when the so-called Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), a "reform" faction in which it figured heavily, was elected. Sharkey became the vice president of the union, and Karen Lewis the president.

In the 2012 contract negotiations, the CTU, aware of the intransigence of Emanuel and the simmering discontent of a membership that had suffered decades of worsening working and living conditions, felt compelled to call a strike in order to get an agreement passed. And while they were fundamentally indifferent to meeting the needs of teachers, they did hope to use the strike to extract concessions from Emanuel which would improve their own institutional interests.

Belying the radical posturing of the CTU, which purported to oppose Emanuel's pro-business education agenda, the union waited until September 10, after the Democratic National Convention ended on September 6, so as not to embarrass Obama, the leader of school "reform," in his presidential reelection bid.

Neither the ISO nor the CTU predicted or wanted the massive response the strike found—by teachers, school workers and the broader working class of Chicago, which had faced setbacks similar to teachers for years. The CTU attempted to shut down the strike as quickly as possible, calling for a vote by the House of Delegates to end the mobilization after just four days and before an agreement had even been finalized.

The union bureaucrats encountered the unexpected resistance, however, of teachers who were growing increasingly skeptical and angry at the attempts of the CTU to reach a resolution on Emanuel's terms. The critical role in this was played by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, which provided teachers with an analysis of the social and political forces they faced and called on teachers to demand that they had the right to know what was in the contract they were being asked to sign. The SEP and the WSWS sought to develop the strike into a broader mobilization of the working class in defense of public education and workers' rights, which would inevitably pose the question of a political struggle with the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

Under immense pressure from the Democratic Party in Chicago and nationally to bring teachers back under control, the CTU and ISO, by a combination of intimidation and deception, managed to

shut down the strike on the ninth day and force a contract through that met all of Emanuel's demands. This included the expansion of test-based evaluation systems, the extension of the school day without compensation, and the granting of broad authority to principals to hire and fire teachers. At the time, Lewis openly admitted that the deal was "an austerity contract"—contrary to the claims of the ISO.

The defeat of the strike paved the way for closing nearly 50 schools, laying off thousands of teachers and slashing hundreds of millions in school funding. The CTU, meanwhile, received its quid pro quo for services rendered when the city allowed one of its affiliates to "organize" teachers at a charter school system.

Following the events of 2012, the CTU and ISO have shifted further to the right. They determined that they would never again allow teachers to almost get out of hand and have instead sought to develop closer ties with Emanuel.

In the current period, the ISO is seeking at all costs to suppress the opposition of teachers and maintain the political domination of the Democratic Party, particularly in the immediate run-up to the presidential elections. With the American Federation of Teachers having been the first union to endorse Hillary Clinton, a warmonger and shill for Wall Street, the last thing either the CTU or ISO wants is for a potential teachers strike to disrupt their cozy relationship with the Democrats.

In the final analysis, the limitless treachery of the ISO is driven by its class interests. It represents a thin layer of the upper-middle class, including trade union bureaucrats, professionals and academics. It is pro-war and deeply hostile to the working class. It seeks privileges and positions of influence for itself and is profoundly hostile to socialism and the interests of the working class.

A precondition for waging a successful struggle in the coming period—for public education, job security, health care, a decent retirement and other basic social rights—is the sober assessment of the class nature, program and record of the ISO, and on that basis the understanding of the necessity to conduct an intransigent fight against it.



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