

The International Socialist Organization campaigns for layoffs, school closures in Chicago

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The role of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) contract negotiations exposes the anti-working class character of this organization, which operates as an auxiliary arm of the Democratic Party.

The ISO has occupied key leadership positions in the CTU since 2010, when it participated in a “Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators” slate that took control of the bureaucracy in union elections. ISO member Jesse Sharkey currently serves as CTU vice president, and a May 16 article in *Socialist Worker* acknowledged that the ISO-backed caucus “has been leading the Chicago Teachers Union” in contract negotiations.

Over this period, the CTU and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have led a citywide attack on public education and on Chicago’s teachers. In 2012, the CTU called off a strike after one week, signed a contract that allowed Mayor Rahm Emanuel to lay off thousands of teachers and close 54 schools, and praised the deal as a “victory.” The latest tentative agreement (TA) is an extension of this conspiracy against teachers and public education.

The agreement, which is being considered today by the CTU House of Delegates prior to a vote by teachers, makes paid pensions a thing of the past for new hires. It requires teachers hired after January 1, 2017 to contribute 9.4 percent of their salaries to the fund—up from 2 percent. CPS previously “picked up” 7.4 percent of the contributions in exchanges for significant wage concessions made by the CTU in 1987 contract negotiations.

The move creates a two-tier structure among teachers, which has been used in the auto and other industries as a wedge to intensify the attack on all workers. It will

only further discourage young people from becoming teachers and will lead to a drop in the quality of public education.

The deal also cuts health care, requiring increased teacher contributions that will save the district an estimated \$58 million over the life of the four-year contract. CPS officials have announced “significant plan changes” to teacher health care that will “substantially” reduce the cost to CPS. On top of this, the CTU agreed to consider “alternative saving mechanisms” that would further reduce the quality of teacher health care.

Current teachers will receive no pay raise for the first two years of the contract and will only receive a 4.5 percent cumulative raise over the last two years. There will be no retroactive pay raise, meaning that teachers will work at an effective pay cut, given inflation, until 2018. New hires will receive two pay raises in 2017 totaling 7 percent, though these will not offset the increased pension and health care costs.

The CTU also agreed to allow CPS a carte blanche to lay off teachers. While the contract teachers rejected on February 1 would have prohibited the district from firing teachers for “economic reasons,” the new TA paves the way for mass teacher layoffs with ten months’ severance pay. This comes after CPS laid off more than 1,000 teachers and support staff in August.

The CTU allows CPS to continue to violate class size standards in exchange for higher dues income from support staff that will be brought into younger grade classrooms with a class size over 32. A 2015 report found over 500 classrooms with a class size over 32, including roughly 75 classrooms with an unbearable 37 students per room or more.

Furthermore, the CTU agreed to give CPS the ability to close schools as soon as a five-year moratorium ends next year. In 2013, Emanuel announced a list of 129 schools recommended or considered for closure, 54 of which he subsequently shut down. The CTU's agreement with the CPS clears the way for further mass school closures.

The ISO is playing a central role in attempting to sell this rotten agreement as a "victory" for teachers, claiming that the CPS was forced to make major concessions on key issues in the contract.

In an October 18 article published on *Socialist Worker*, ISO members Lee Sustar and Alan Maass write: "Emanuel and [Illinois Governor Bruce] Rauner thought their tough-guy routine would get the teachers to cave. But Emanuel was the one who blinked first." This was supposedly due to the "strength and determination of the rank and file—and the alliances made by the union to stand up for all of working-class Chicago."

In fact, the CTU has for more than a year and a half sought to find some way of countering and smothering the determination of teachers to resist further concessions. Despite two overwhelming strike authorization votes, the CTU has kept teachers working without a contract as it engaged in negotiations behind closed doors with Emanuel. It January, it reached an agreement with Emanuel that it initially praised but was then forced to rhetorically criticize, after details were leaked on social media.

The ISO piece consists of shameless efforts to paint the agreement in the rosier colors. They write, for example, that "a moratorium on school closings would remain in place through the next school year, with closures to take place after that date only if schools don't meet graduation requirements." In other words, the schools in the poorest neighborhoods, that are most underfunded and overcrowded, will be shut down. This, according to the ISO, is a victory.

After praising the agreement, Maass and Sustar disingenuously pose the question, "Could more have been won on the picket line?" They respond by warning that if teachers attempted to wage a struggle to defend their interests and public education they would be left isolated. "Most of the city's big union leaders, either fearful of the mayor or allied with him, were quiet in the run-up to the strike deadline. They would

have to be prodded into supporting the teachers, as was the case in the 2012 strike." The CPS would encourage the development of a "back-to-work movement if the strike dragged on."

In fact, the CTU has played the central role in isolating teachers. In collaboration with the rest of the AFL-CIO, the CTU blocked the development of a broader struggle among workers throughout the city that would have come into conflict with the Emanuel administration and the Democratic Party. As for the "union leaders" who are "allied with" Emanuel, this includes Sharkey and CTU president Karen Lewis. Just last month, Lewis praised Emanuel, saying that they had a "respectful" relationship.

If, contrary to the recommendation of the CTU, teachers reject the contract, the ISO writes, "the urgency in building solidarity with the teachers will be just as important as before." They don't add that, just as before, the CTU and the ISO will do everything they can to block this solidarity and impose another defeat.

The ISO helped negotiate and defends this proposed contract not because it has mistakenly failed to recognize the consequences of the deal. Rather, the ISO supports the attack on public education because it represents a privileged layer of the upper-middle class—including sections of the trade union apparatus—that stands to gain from diverting resources away from social programs and public schools.

Behind its "left" phraseology, the ISO is an agent of the Democratic Party and a defender of the profits of American banks and corporations. For this same reason, the ISO supports the US government's plans for war in Syria, which it also defends with "socialist" rhetoric.

In this sense, the TA is a "victory"—not for Chicago teachers and students—but for the CTU bureaucracy, the ISO, and the privileged upper-middle class they represent.



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