

Chicago charter school union announces contract deal

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The United Educators at UNO (UEU), a union local for charter school teachers affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, announced early Wednesday a tentative contract agreement with the UNO Charter School Network. UCSN is a private charter operator of 15 schools with 8,000 students, established by the United Neighborhood Organization, a Hispanic community group on the Chicago's west side.

Teachers in the UEU had voted to strike by a 95 percent margin, but three hours after the midnight strike deadline, negotiators accepted an agreement without finalized contract language. If the strike had gone forward, it would have been the first open-ended strike by a union at a charter school.

UEU is a relatively new local of the AFT, whose president Randi Weingarten flew in for the negotiations. This resulted in a concessions contract that is remarkably similar to one proposed for 25,000 Chicago Public School teachers by the Chicago Teachers Union last week. Weingarten's intervention shows the lengths to which the unions will go to clamp down on any strike action in the weeks leading up to the November 8 election, for which the AFT has mobilized all its resources behind Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party.

On pensions, both the CTU and UEU contracts initiate a two-tier system that strips benefits from new hires. In the previous contract, UCSN paid a 7 percent pension contribution for teachers; in the new contract, new hires will lose the pension payment, while receiving a 7 percent pay raise in the 2018-2019 school year. Originally, the charter operator demanded no raises for teachers over the two-year period, and the announcement of the tentative agreement does not say that teachers with the pension pickup will receive raises.

The UEU is presenting extra pay for teachers with more than 32 students in a class as a victory, as though more than 32 students is an acceptable class size to begin with. Larger class sizes place enormous demands on teachers because of the wide variety of educational approaches required and the complexity of managing large numbers of students.

In the tentative agreement, teachers receive a slight reduction of workdays, and paraprofessionals receive unspecified raises.

Most significantly, perhaps, is the UEU announcement that a joint committee will be formed to "make recommendations as to economic conditions based on funding shortfalls for the publicly funded school network."

During the negotiations UCSN claimed financial insolvency and demanded the ability to open up the contract and impose concessions at a later date. The CEO of UCSN, Richard Rodriguez, stated that the two sides are still about \$1.5 million short of needed funds for the contract. So now, having abandoned the threat of a strike, the UEU will work with management to resolve a funding shortfall with contract language that may allow further cuts to be imposed.

This joint committee is a template for the union getting a seat at the table with management to impose future concessions, and demonstrates the aim of the AFT to promote charter schools in order to take part in their management and funding decisions, while expanding the union's dues base among teachers.

The 2012 strike of Chicago teachers resulted in a concessions contract and ultimately several rounds of teacher layoffs as budgets were cut and 50 schools were closed. As the CTU faced a loss of members and declining dues, unionization began at charter schools, with CTU and AFT support. The United Educators at

UNO (UEU) signed the first contract at UNO in 2013.

The union within the charter schools is not in opposition to the use of charters to undermine public education, as the AFT makes abundantly clear. On the charter school section of the AFT website, a statement reads, “For some labor leaders, unionized charters offer the prospect of increasing union membership in a small but fast-growing sector. Even more important, perhaps, they demonstrate labor’s willingness to innovate.”

For the AFT, this means more membership, and for teachers, innovation often means merit pay, reduced protection, and longer hours. Aside from stumping for Clinton, AFT President Weingarten keeps busy promoting charter school growth. The union goes so far as to accept funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for its “Innovation” programs.

Chicago's huge growth in charter schools over the last 20 years has been pushed by private foundations, wealthy individuals, and leading Democratic politicians, and even the AFT itself.

UNO is, so far, the most revealing example of the rotten nexus of city and state Democratic officials with the corrupt leadership of the private school network. In 2012, then CEO Juan Rangel spent over \$60,000 on his “business platinum” credit card at restaurants, with many tabs of over \$1,000 at luxury Chicago locations.

That same year, \$150,000 was spent on the grand opening of a new charter school that included a laser-light show, fireworks and entertainment for Rahm Emanuel and Governor Pat Quinn (D), to celebrate \$98 million secured for charter school construction by Democratic State Speaker of the House Michael Madigan. By contrast, a year later in 2013, Chicago Public Schools closed over 50 schools.

Many more corrupt uses of funding were revealed in an investigation by the *Chicago Sun-Times*, eventually leading to the resignation of Rangel (with a \$206,250 payout) and the severing of the shady connection between the United Neighborhood Organization and UNO Charter School Network, which had paid millions to its parent organization for management.

Now UCSN claims insolvency, and has already cut its budget, resulting in more than two dozen school-based positions being cut. These included counselors and technology resources, which are already extremely limited for many students in Chicago. Many charter schools in Chicago offer little beyond academic test

prep; arts, music, and extracurricular activities may be limited or nonexistent.



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