

Chicago Teachers Union House of Delegates approves concessions contract

Our reporter
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The Chicago Teachers Union's (CTU) House of Delegates voted 358-150 in support of the contract reached between the CTU and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) on October 10. The agreement is scheduled to go before the city's more than 25,000 teachers and staff for a vote on October 27 and 28.

Both district officials and union leaders have taken the opportunity to promote as a success a contract that will escalate the attack on the living standards and working conditions of teachers, while paving the way for the closure of more public schools.

Emily Bittner, communications director for CPS, used the union's own "fair contract" slogan to urge teachers to back the deal: "The CTU's House of Delegates took an important step forward today in recommending that teachers ratify this tentative agreement. After negotiating closely with President Karen Lewis and the CTU's leadership, we believe that this is a fair contract for both parties..."

The deal, worked out behind closed doors as teachers were kept on the job without a new contract for 15 months, would phase out the so-called "pension pickup" for new hires, shifting costs for pensions onto teachers and creating two tiers of workers.

This will give CPS an added incentive to lay off veteran teachers. Some teachers complained on the CTU's Facebook page that every tool at the district's disposal, including the teacher evaluation system, will now be used to get rid of teachers deemed "too expensive," with the union's blessing.

In the tentative agreement, the CPS and CTU are working together to push the most expensively pensioned teachers off the books through an early retirement incentive for the end of this school year. Eligible teachers and staff are being offered \$1,500 for each year of service.

The contact also includes meager pay raises, with no raises in the first two years of the contract and a combined 4.5 percent raise in the last two years. This means an effective pay cut. As for the \$200 million promised to Chicago schools by Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner, a former private equity mogul, these funds are in fact entirely uncertain.

Rank and file teachers opposing the deal have also expressed outrage that the agreement allows CPS to furlough teachers at will: "Nothing in this agreement shall impair or diminish the BOARD's right to implement unpaid furlough or shutdown days for employees," the agreement states.

A CPS social worker writing in an education publication yesterday denounced the agreement and the pressure applied from CTU leaders to accept the sellout, including that from International Socialist Organization member and CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey: "There are so many things to say about this last disaster otherwise called the tentative agreement. The one brought up here—allowing CPS to set furlough days—is one of them. Let's just say that Springfield does not come up with the money promised. Guess what, folks—you don't come to work! ...

"I was on the big bargaining team until the beginning of September and was there when CTU leadership tried to bully us to accept the January offer. Jesse was so rude to me that he had to apologize! I am known to be a very strong advocate for clinicians that I was able to stay on the bargaining team all last school year even though I had retired in June 2015. I was told by Jesse when I was taken off it was because I was retired! Why was it okay all of last year but suddenly it was not[?]"

Another teacher expressed her thoughts immediately after the approval was announced: "Who is in bed with who? How can you accept this crappy contract? There

is no concrete full disclosure for us to read... No COLA.... Here we go in this trickbag again..."

Other major points of contention include the lack of improvements to basic teaching and learning conditions and student services. The ratio of students to social workers is estimated to be a staggering 1,000 to one. No caps on class sizes were agreed beyond second grade classrooms. Since the school closures and consolidations of 2013—facilitated by the CTU's shutdown of the 2012 strike on terms agreeable to Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel—overcrowded classrooms and inappropriate and unsafe impromptu “teaching spaces” have become widespread problems.

The tentative agreement lengthens the time span for severance pay from five to 10 months in preparation for additional layoffs. A moratorium on school closures ends in 2018, earlier than the duration of the four-year tentative agreement.

About the House of Delegates vote and the fate of the contract, Sharkey said on WCPT AM 820 radio October 12, “Members could look at it and reject it I suppose. I think that's unlikely... we think it's about as good as we could have achieved under these circumstances...”

Sharkey went on to explain that the pension phase out “allowed them [CPS] to guarantee well-rated tenured teachers can be placed in vacancies. So when these school actions come, they will have a shot at vacancies.”

Defense of this sellout contract and such casual reference to layoffs and school closures or “school actions” clearly reveal Sharkey’s main concerns have nothing to do with defending teachers’ working conditions or defending public education, but in winning the CTU ever more intimate involvement with carrying out Emanuel’s pro-corporate education policies.

Since the 2012 strike, the CTU has deepened its political alliance with the Emanuel administration, and CTU President Karen Lewis and Emanuel have worked out a close relationship. This is part of the union’s efforts to suppress opposition among teachers and subordinate them to the reelection campaign of the Democratic Party.

The WSWs urges teachers to begin now to organize opposition to the contract. Teachers should raise the demand that they have the ability to read and study the

full contract for two weeks prior to any vote.

Rank-and-file committees should be set up now to organize a struggle against concessions independently of the CTU, which has proven itself once again as an arm of the state, and to appeal to the broadest layers of workers throughout Chicago and beyond to wage a common struggle in defense of jobs, pensions, health care and public education.



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